FUTURE FAIRY TALES
ALIEN PRINCE'S MERMAID
ZARA ZENIA

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A Sci-Fi Alien Fairy Tale Romance

ZARA ZENIA

Illustrated by

NATASHA SNOW

Edited by

VALORIE CLIFTON

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Edited by Valorie Clifton

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CHAPTER 1

DARBNIX

"I cannot believe that you are *still* turning a blind eye on the BIAS scanner, even three years later." I narrowed my eyes on my brother and awaited his inevitable protest in response.

Of course, I was referring to the Biostatistical Information Assessment and Symbiosis scanner, a device that I begrudgingly had been forced to use by my oldest brother, Gardax. We didn't see eye to eye on the reliability of the device, but since he'd played an elaborate roll in the creativity and production part of its conception, Gardax was less than thrilled whenever I brought up its lack of accountability factors.

Not that my opinion on the subject mattered much to Gardax, but he had been the only one of our seven prince brothers to have had any kind of success in finding a human mate while utilizing it.

In theory, the BIAS scanner was supposed to analyze genetic markers and the biocomposition of an organism. From there, it would try to accomplish and identify compatibility between two specimens, for example, a woman on Earth and a Trilyn prince such as myself and my brothers. Each of my brothers, along with me, owned and operated one of these devices, developed by a group of the most highly trained and skilled scientists and engineers on our planet of Trilynia.

The scientists had worked tirelessly in order to program each of our unique genetic configurations. Once formatted, the scanner was supposed to accurately detect the reproductive compatibility of any specimen surveyed and identify the individual whose markers offer optimal genetic potential for the production of viable progeny.

In other words, the tiny metal device with the sleek and shiny surface was theoretically supposed to find us our perfect genetic match.

Like I said before, I had my doubts. The damn thing looked more sophisticated than it actually functioned, in my opinion.

"Why wouldn't I attest to its cause?" Gardax gave me a blank stare that still had the lacing underworks of being patronizing attached to his subtle sneer. "I'm still an advocate to using the genetic scanner."

Gardax drummed his fingertips against the wood grain of the council table. He leaned back in the seat and began rocking back and forth. The chair protested against his size and weight and squeaked with each jerky movement he made. He continued to inspect me with that same fury-inducing grin stretched

across his lips.

I fretfully paced the council room in my palace ship that I had landed and docked in Topeka, Kansas, for longer than I had originally cared to stay. When it came to dealing with Gardax, I had to formulate the most intricately precise response, even during an inconspicuous brotherly argument.

He was only a year older than me, but by Trilyn protocol, the eldest prince was the ruler over all the continents, no matter which of us tried to protest.

"Calm down, Darbnix. You'll find your mate soon enough." He waved his hand and gestured abstractly out the window.

"It's been *three years*, Gardax," I reminded him. "And none of the rest of us have come any closer to acquiring a matched mate with this stupid thing."

I waved the BIAS scanner around in my hand, twirling it between my fingers.

"Stop it!" Gardax ordered at once. "You might break it."

I allowed a cynical scoff to escape from my lips. "Trust me, that would be a wonderful thing."

Gardax glared at me. "I don't know why you are so objecting when it comes to using it." He eyed the device carefully as if it were one of his own children that he had to delicately watch over and protect.

"Because it's not reliable in the slightest!" I threw my arms up in the air with frustrated exasperation.

Gardax scowled and squared his jaw. He took a deep breath and glanced out the window. Clearly, he was contemplating the best response to hash out to me.

"Remember Darla?" I gently nudged.

"That was fraud, not a flaw in the device," Gardax countered, sitting up erect in his seat.

I shrugged. It was like comparing apples to . . . well, another kind of apple. The situations had been so similarly interlocked that you couldn't really differentiate where one problem ended and another began.

"Darla is in jail for her crimes," Gardax whispered defensively. "So I don't see your point."

"Yeah, but it just goes to show," I continued. "The electronic engineers have the luxury of altering the devices to exploit us. They are the ones who created the devices, so they have the knowledge, intelligence, and capability of attempting to hijack the scanners and use them for their own benefit."

"That was one isolated incident," Gardax protested with a dismissive wave of his hand.

I began to notice that since this quarrel had burrowed into borderline heated, he'd refused to make eye contact with me or meet my gaze. Did that show a sign of weakness or that he might cave and let me win this one, at least this one time? It was highly doubtful, but a prince could use optimism to his advantage.

Discussing the subject of Darla was a soft and touchy spot for Gardax. We had thankfully caught her in the act of her fraud of manipulating the scanners to alter whom the princes should marry. This

revelation had come dangerously too close for comfort, and Gardax had been teetering on the edge of marrying the wrong woman.

Now, he was happily married to his beautiful and kind wife named Amy. She was hardworking and clever, a perfect match in the end for Gardax.

“You must be jealous that I’ve found a mate and you haven’t.”

“Jealous? You really have the audacity to assume that I’m jealous of you?”

I leaned over the side of the table, disrupting Gardax’s personal space. He continued to study my reaction. “Well,” he stated evenly, “what would you call it?”

I laughed. “Frustration? Skepticism for the device’s practicality?”

Gardax stared at the table. “You just need to give it some more time. It will eventually match you with your perfect mate.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” I asked with bitterness. “The scanner just isn’t reliable. The fact that I and the rest of our brothers are still single three years later proves that theory.”

“We need to hold more parties,” Gardax countered. It was a feeble suggestion.

It was no use. This argument was heading nowhere. Gardax wasn’t going to hear me out or listen to reason.

“We don’t need to hold more parties,” I groaned. “We are holding the acceptable amount.”

“Clearly, we are not.” Gardax finally met my gaze.

Our personalities weren’t the only things that clashed. I stared into his yellow eyes, a contrast from my pale blue-green ones. His skin was a lighter bronze color than mine as well, and his hair sat on top of his head, as jet-black as midnight without a moon. Mine was more of a chestnut color, blending into chocolate-brown.

I already knew that Gardax never liked to be reminded of the subject of Darla, and the way he aggressively stared into my eyes proved that our encounter might come to blows if it built up any further.

We were interrupted before the intensity of the moment exploded like lava erupting from our livid minds.

Our brothers Akrawn and Manzar walked into the council room at just the right moment to keep us from clawing at each other’s throat. My brothers were the only ones who had access to this private room, and they used eye scanning recognition technology connected to computerized software to get inside.

“What’s going on in here?” Manzar furrowed his brow and shot us an anxious glance. He was the career military man in the family. His honor and bravery to fight in battle made him trustworthy and respected.

His coppery-colored hair matched his ginger eyes, which peered at us with wary trepidation. His

olive skin could be seen through the fighting gear he always loved to wear.

“Nothing.” I skirted across the room, away from Gardax before anything got out of hand.

As brothers and rulers of different continents spread across our planet of Trilynia, egos were bound to get bruised. We all harbored a leader mindset and we crossly jarred against one another on prickly subjects.

“Darbnix is sourly attempting to get me to cave and change my viewpoints on the BIAS scanner,” Gardax said.

Manzar and Akrawn exchanged a worried glance with each other but ultimately didn’t respond.

It wasn’t my intention to upset my eldest brother, but I had my suspicions about the device and it was my natural instinct to bring those questions to light. If I had a problem, it was always best to instigate a solution, in my opinion.

I rubbed my aching temples and blew out a calming breath of air. I didn’t want to debate on the matter anymore. I was exhausted as it was. I needed a fresh perspective and a little quality time to dissect my thoughts away from my brothers.

“I was just leaving,” I mentioned hastily, trying not to grumble with animosity.

I nodded to my brothers and swiftly trotted from the room.

Clearing my head in solitude was the only resolution I could find to the situation I was in. I didn’t want to muddle and cloud my thoughts with worry, but I didn’t know how to effectively convey to Gardax that relying on technology which had prominent flaws was not the answer. It certainly wasn’t the way to solve our romance problems.

I was in favor of using the natural ways of finding a mate. From my perspective, I still pondered and longed for the prospective idea of meeting a woman, courting her, and then falling in love after discovering we had mutual interests. Call me crazy, but even as powerful as I was, I was still inclined to drift toward the good old-fashioned way of meeting a mate.

I trudged through the palace, stopping in the kitchen when I noticed an envelope on the counter. I glanced out the window. Being in Topeka, Kansas, did have its positive features.

The landscape reminded me of the rolling hills and countryside I was so fond of back home on my Trilynia continent of Noor. Noor was the farming and livestock center of the planet, and I was proud of being the ruler of the beautiful nation.

In Noor, there were plains that rolled on for an eternity, always chasing the gorgeous and wonderous horizon. Heavily cultivated and terraced hills adorned the landscape as well, and stream after gorgeous stream glistened.

Although farming was my source of income and trade, I housed a particularly delightful hobby that my got on the nerves of my brothers. In my spare time, I enjoyed breeding and raising watch-lizards.

I prided myself on being a modest, down-to-earth man who appreciated the simpler things in life. I was a no-frills kind of guy, and I certainly didn’t want to be matched with a fussy woman who only

desired material things.

Yes, it was true that I was a prince in every sense of the word. I was handsome and rich, and that usually attracted the wrong sort of woman into my life. I hated the conflict that loomed over my head when it came to Gardax, and I hoped that there was some kind of practical and graceful way for us to unite and band together in the end.

My eyes drifted backed down to the envelope sitting on the counter. It was still sealed. My staff had placed it there for me to open and review, politely leaving that part to my own discretion.

I picked up the envelop, noticing that it was from UEG Special Agent David Davon. He was our computer crimes expert. He worked with the planetary governments' intercontinental law enforcement division.

He was a prodigy-level computer genius who came from a long line of technologically advanced family members. He was slightly nerdy but boisterously friendly. I respected him and his profession.

Davon, as we affectionately called him, fit the persona of a bookish computer science geek. He was tall and wiry. His skin was medium-toned, a rarity to our planet. He had thick black hair that was always a little sloppy and unruly at the top. His crowning feature was a mustache that he proudly wore and refused to ever shave or trim.

"Okay, Davon." I chuckled to myself under my breath. "Let's see what kind of outlandish scenarios you are scheming and creating now."

I had the envelope in my hand, but before I was able to even open the seal, I received a call. Alarmed, I noticed that it was from one of my servants.

"Hello?" I picked up the phone device we used to communicate with each other. My voice rang with cautious curiosity.

"Prince Darbnix." My servant Julius spoke with sincere and humble apology.

"What is it?" I asked, needing him to get to the point. Patience wasn't one of my virtues.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," Julius struggled. "But there is a problem with Slith."

"Slith?" I yelped. "What is wrong with Slith?"

Slith was my eight-year-old watch-lizard. I viewed him as somewhat of a companion or as what the earthlings would refer to as 'man's best friend,' only they had dogs. Slith was the size of a large dog-type animal, only he was profoundly more intelligent. Watch-lizards were primarily used and owned by the Trilyn folk to protect their properties.

I had kept Slith out of one of my litters. We had been drawn toward each other from day one, and I couldn't imagine life without him by my side. Watch-lizards were typically brightly colored, but Slith was a beautiful deep purple color, almost jewel-like.

Julius cleared his throat with hesitation before speaking again. "We think he might have eaten something that has caused him to fall ill," he explained.

“What did he eat?” I asked, even though the answer could have been any number of things.

Watch-lizards were omnivorous. Generally speaking, they would eat fruit, small rodents, edible flowers, other smaller lizards of different species, and items of that nature. Slith was a special character. He also loved to eat bread, cardboard, cushions, and other unnaturally and hard to digest things that didn’t fall under the category of edible.

“We saw some empty boxes in the food supply in the basement,” Julius confessed slightly reluctantly.

My heart plummeted through my feet and to the floor beneath me. “I’ll be right down.”

I rushed down the stairs of the palace. Slith was lying in a fetal position. His purple body was tucked and curled into itself protectively.

His eyes were droopy. His tail wilted like a dying flower and he whimpered in greeting upon my arrival.

“What happened to you, buddy?” I whispered as I stroked his scaly, leathery skin.

Slith blinked in response and tried to move around, although his efforts were in vain. He shrieked in pain.

I glanced up at Julius. There were cardboard boxes everywhere, ripped to shreds with chew and bite marks through most of them.

“He must have some sort of intestinal blockage,” I whispered with remorse and a twinge of guilt. I should have known better and should have carefully stocked the food resources where Slith wouldn’t be able to reach the items that could cause him harm if he consumed them.

“I need to find an exo-veterinarian,” I panted. I wasn’t sure how sick Slith was, but I didn’t want to wait around and watch his health decline.

I jogged upstairs to my computer room where I researched the area, hunting down someone able to care for exo-livestock, pets and farm animals imported from other planets.

My eyes scanned the wealth of information in front of me. I finally landed on a particularly cute picture of a woman named Dr. Rose Rand. She was twenty-eight years old, two years older than me. She had enticing and mysterious gray eyes that reminded me of the sky at twilight. Her carrot-red hair was pulled into a no-nonsense braid, but it gave an extra boost to her slender facial features.

Her biographical description explained that she was a native to Kansas and had been raised on a farm, much like myself. Her resume stated that she currently ran her own veterinary hospital right here in Topeka. She specialized in the care of exo-animals.

I promptly picked up the phone and dialed the number on my screen, getting through to her secretary in an instant. I explained the situation with Slith and asked if there was any way that Dr. Rand could come out to the palace ship.

After an excruciating wait on hold for several minutes, the secretary came back on the line and cheerfully announced that Dr. Rand was available to meet me at the palace to dive into immediate emergency care for Slith.

It was a special circumstance, but if she was willing to provide the desperate help and care needed, I was ready to summon her to the palace grounds at once. I raced back down the stairs to the basement where Slith still lay in a pathetic and weak position on the floor. It was so unlike his normal, curious, and muscularly athletic demeanor. I needed to get my pet back, and Dr. Rand was going to be the best way. I would count down the minutes until her arrival, and in the meantime, I would keep Slith as comfortable as possible.

CHAPTER 2

ROSE

To say that I loved animals was quite the understatement. One might say that I bonded with just about any animal out there. I felt a sense of pride in my ability to be an animal whisperer, so to speak.

"Dr. Rand?"

My lanky intern, Marcus, poked his head into surgery room one, where I was currently performing a cataract procedure on an elderly Magulute. The best comparison I could give to a Magulute from a neighboring dwarf planet to an animal here on Earth would be that of a Bassett hound.

The exo-animals had been imported from another dwarf planet a couple of years away by shuttle. They were normally farming animals and produced milk. So, I guess in that sense, you could compare them to a cow, but they looked more like Bassett hounds.

This particularly unlucky Magulute had the same droopy red eyes as a Bassett might. Its floppy ears sagged onto the table. He was blind in both eyes, hence the surgery, of course, and I was hoping to give the poor dear a few more years of sight before he went off into animal heaven (if there were such a thing). I always liked to believe in that kind of magic.

I turned my head to glance at Marcus over my shoulder. I peered over my surgical scope that I used in order to achieve a more precise incision.

"Yes?"

This was a fairly routine procedure for me. I'd studied in exo-livestock veterinary school in Topeka, Kansas, and I was entering my third year with my own practice. I'd used my life savings acquired by hard work on the rolling farm lands spanning my family's property in rural Kansas. I'd put in the hours and the strenuous labor in order to save up for my dream of owning my own veterinary hospital.

Not everybody got to accomplish their goals by the age of twenty-eight, but I preferred to view myself as humbly grateful. I'd had quite the support system and people rooting for me. I'd loved animals all my life, especially ones from different planets. I loved obtaining new information about their biology and studying their abstract DNA. I also enjoyed comparing them to the regular animals you'd find roaming around on farms that were native to Earth, such as pigs, chickens, and cows.

Don't get me wrong. I loved watching an adorable pig squeal and roll around in the mud as much as

the next farm girl, but I relished in being an advocate and a doctor for exo-livestock.

“You have a fairly important call on the line,” Marcus stated, clearing his throat uncomfortably as if he hated to interrupt me but had been backed into a corner.

I don’t know why he always behaved so timidly around me. I never gave him any reason to fear me, or anyone on my staff, for that matter.

I shot him a warm smile that he would be able to notice through the wrinkles around my eyes above my surgical mask.

“Can it wait about fifteen minutes? I’m almost finished with this procedure.”

I could tell that Marcus was fidgeting anxiously. I was more amused than annoyed. He took a step toward me and nearly knocked over a tray holding gauze and stitches.

“I’m so sorry,” he proclaimed as he instantly caught himself before falling. He pushed his straw-colored hair off his forehead.

I chuckled. “Don’t worry about it.”

Marcus was a bit of a klutz, but he was such a sweet kid that it didn’t bother me. I knew that he was genuinely interested in the work, and I hated to send him home, especially because as an intern, he wasn’t paid a dime to be here.

“The person on the other line seems distraught and panicked. They said they think that their watch-lizard had an intestinal blockage and they can’t get the animal to move.”

I glanced at Marcus. Now, he had my full attention. “A watch-lizard?” I wanted to make sure I had heard him correctly. “But those are Trilyn-native. Was it a prince calling?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Marcus blushed and glanced at the floor.

My gaze floated to Robin. She was my physician’s assistant. She had straight brown hair that she always wore down. She always had a serious expression on her face, and I’m pretty sure she didn’t know the meaning of sarcasm.

Robin had formal medical training too, but her years of servitude and residencies didn’t span as long as mine had. She was still able to perform routine procedures on her own as long as the animal or its condition wasn’t high-risk.

“Do you feel comfortable taking over while I take this call?” I asked her apologetically. Hell would have to freeze over before I told a Trilyn prince I’d call him back. Besides, the cataract surgery was nearly completed at this point.

Robin nodded. Her silky brown hair was shiny under the surgical lamps.

“Yep. I’ve got it, Boss.”

I smiled. Robin would take any opportunity she could to get ahead and solidify her confidence and experience. I had faith in her and she proudly knew it.

“Thanks.” I pulled the blue gloves off my hands, washed them, and yanked the surgical mask down to where it hung around my neck like a necklace.

Then, I breezily wandered to my back office. The little red hold button was blinking on line one. My heart raced in anticipation.

“This is Dr. Rose Rand,” I proclaimed through the speaker. “How can I be of service to you or your pet?”

The voice was deep and masculine. “Hello,” he mumbled scruffily into the receiver. “I have a problem with my watch-lizard. He’s really sick. I think he must have eaten something that he’s having difficulty in digesting.”

I recognized his rambling. He was upset, naturally. It was my job to pull him out of a panic-stricken state of mind and assure him that his beloved watch-lizard would be okay.

“These things are fairly common in watch-lizard breeds,” I mentioned, maybe a little too casually, but I didn’t want to worry him any more than he was.

“Who am I talking to?” Curiosity prickled on the back of my neck. My ears buzzed. I’d always wanted to meet a Trilyn prince.

“This is Prince Darbnix, ruler of the continent Noor on the planet of Trilynia.” His voice was almost commanding and slightly egotistical.

“That is quite a title.” I chuckled, attempting to lighten the mood.

I was met with silence. Crickets might as well have been chirping in the background.

“Anyway, I am able to squeeze in a spot on my calendar today if you want to bring him in for observation and a thorough checkup,” I added.

“I would prefer it if any doctor serving us or the animals on my palace ship might come directly to the palace,” he stated nobly.

“Oh.” I took a step back. I had to admit I was somewhat dazzled by the fact that he was basically summoning me to his ship. The affair sounded so official.

“Are you able to get here quickly? I will send troops to retrieve you and carry you aboard the ship if you are agreeable.”

“Do I have to sign a waiver or anything?” I snorted, although I didn’t mean to. I was trying to chuckle, but through my nervousness, it came out as more of a snort.

“I just need to know if you are okay with being escorted to my palace in order to care for my wounded watch-lizard.” He was curt and to the point.

“Of course.” I nodded and ran a hand through my carrot-colored braid and locked my steel gray eyes onto the supply kit I reserved for house calls. “I can be ready as soon as ten minutes from now.”

“Wonderful.” His voice went from doomed to gleeful in a matter of seconds.

I hung up the phone and started gathering items I might need for the trip. I didn't know the size, shape, or age of the lizard, but I would bring my computer and all the medical equipment necessary to care for the foreign animal.

"I have to go on a house call," I explained to my receptionist, a mousy, thin girl who never spoke unless she was spoken to directly. "I will be back to lock up the office later, but in the meantime, you can reach me on my cell if something urgent comes up."

"Yes, Dr. Rand," she said with a smile and a blush as I walked out the door and into the Kansas heat.

A few minutes later, a few men approached me, explaining that they were from the direct guard patrol for Prince Darbnix. We gave our introductions and I followed them with intrigue and bubbling curiosity until we got into the hovercrafts that would lead us to the palace.

"Do I need any special mask or anything?" I asked of one of the guards, who was decked out in special military gear as if he were preparing to walk out onto the battlefield at any moment. I supposed they had to be prepared for anything, even if the Trilyn race was here on a peaceful mission, as they claimed.

"We aren't going far enough into the sky," one of them mentioned with boredom. He even went as far as to yawn before strapping himself into his seat.

"Okay," I mumbled to no one but myself and watched the plains of Kansas become smaller and smaller as we floated into the sky.

Surprisingly, it wasn't a long trip. In fewer than five minutes, we were shuttled across a breezeway and into the palace grounds. I was officially on foreign soil, and I had exhilaration running through my veins. I didn't know what I'd be met with, but I was up for the challenge.

"This way," one of the guards instructed with a swift wave of his hand.

I followed him down a slender hallway until we exited onto a platform containing stairs that only led down.

"Where are we going?" My alarm bells were going off, and I swallowed hard.

"Slith is down in the basement where they keep the food," the guard explained.

"Oh," I said softly with an apprehensive nod. "Okay."

We walked down the steps. The corridor was dimly lit and smelled musty, just like a basement. My footsteps echoed every time I took a step down.

"Through this door," one of the guards stated dully and pushed open a metal door that looked extremely heavy.

I peeked around the room until I heard someone call from behind me. I tried not to startle as I spun around. There, I gazed into the most handsome pale blue eyes I'd ever seen. They were also sort of green, as if you were staring at your own reflection in a lagoon.

"Dr. Rand, thank you so much for coming. I'm Prince Darbnix." He gave me a deliciously devious

smile that was laced with so much mischief it made my head spin. He towered over me by at least a foot. I didn't mind it, and I wasn't intimidated by him at all. His demeanor was much softer than it had been on the phone.

He extended a mocha-colored arm to shake with me. His grip was firm, sturdy, and made me feel safe and protected. His brown hair was short and wavy and suited his facial features in a pleasing way.

"I'm so sorry for how aggressive I might have seemed to you over the phone," he explained as he beckoned for me to follow him deeper into the basement.

I noticed stockpiles of food, boxes and crates piled up to the ceiling. "It's no problem," I whispered through my inspection of the area. "I know you probably just want to get your lizard back to normal."

"He's my best friend," Prince Darbnix admitted with a sheepish look that gave him boyish features.

I smiled. "That's really sweet."

"His name is Slith," he went on. "He's eight years old. This isn't the first time he's eaten something that didn't agree with his stomach, but it's the first time we've had to call outside sources to assist with his wellbeing."

"That's what I'm here for," I said and patted my trusty medical kit that I clutched in my gloved left hand.

"Thank you again for agreeing to come on such short notice." He spoke with genuine gratitude and appreciation that warmed my soul.

"You're very welcome. Where is the little fellow?"

"Over here." That's when Darbnix crouched down.

I trailed his movements and saw a scaly, sparkling purple lizard rolled up in a ball of apparent pain on the cold concrete floor.

"Hello," I crooned to the animal and stroked its back. Its skin was also cool and softer than I'd expected. "It's okay. We are going to fix you up, I promise."

Darbnix gave me a glance as if he were studying me for honesty. I gave him a devoted smile. "I have over five years of experience dealing with exo-livestock animals."

His features relaxed a little. "Your resume was quite impressive in my search."

"You won't be disappointed," I assured him.

He stared at me with a twinkle in his eye, as if he wanted to dish out a private joke for only me to hear. My spine tingled with excitement just being next to such a gorgeous man like him, regardless of which planet he might call home.

I cleared my throat and began moving things out of my medical kit. "I plan to pump his stomach to remove the contents and see what we've got going on in there," I said with a professional demeanor.

"Sounds good to me," he responded. "Whatever works to get Slith back to normal."

I inspected Slith. He was a little smaller than a Great Dane, and other than being a lizard, he resembled a large dog.

Every time Slith whimpered or cried out in pain, Darbnix winced as if he, too felt some kind of referred pain from his beloved pet.

“I promise I’ll be gentle and delicate,” I whispered with a kind smile that bounced to Darbnix.

“Thank you,” he said with a flashy, handsome smile. “I trust you.”

I held up a long, circular tube. “This is called a toxin removal device,” I told him. “It’s easier to pronounce than the official term for it,” I added with a chuckle.

Darbnix frowned and then peered up at me with unease. “What exactly does it do?”

I clicked it on. The device made a slight humming noise, which was normal. “It works as basically a suction to expel any contents from the stomach that might be too large and stuck there and unable to move into the bowels,” I explained. I wrinkled my nose studiously as I observed the animal in deep concentration.

“Will it hurt?” Darbnix’s voice was a few decibels higher than before.

I gave him a warm smile. His question was only natural and expected. Many pet owners I encountered had the anxious jitters when it came to having their pets undergo scary-sounding procedures.

I shook my head and frowned. “He might feel a slight discomfort, but hurt? No. He shouldn’t feel very much pain at all, none of significance.”

“Good.” Darbnix smiled. “Can I sit here with him?”

“Absolutely! It will probably make him feel better to know that his master is here to comfort him.”

I moved the stomach suctioning device closer to the lizard. His response was to scowl at me through glassy dark eyes. He stuck his tongue out and slithered it across the air with a threatening hiss.

I didn’t even bat an eye. I was used to dealing with animals just like this who were in distress. It was their natural instinct to ward off predators by appearing menacing.

“It’s okay, little buddy,” I purred. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

In theory, he shouldn’t feel much, only a little pressure, just as I’d advised Darbnix. As long as I concentrated and steered the nozzle in the right direction, the lizard would probably come out of this procedure mostly unscathed. Its discomfort was originating in its visibly swollen belly. The contents to blame for the obstruction were soon to be discovered.

I could tell that Slith was absolutely miserable, and it was in everyone’s best interest to get him back in pristine shape as soon as possible.

I placed the nozzle of the device into the lizard’s mouth, and he clamped down, just as I’d expected and needed in order for this to be a successful mission. After a few seconds, I began to feel the pull and tug as if I were a fisherman holding a rod. I began to pull back on the device, gently as not to cause any internal bruising to the lizard’s esophagus.

Slith hacked, coughed, and retched. It was a grueling process, but after a minute or two, its watery eyes shut and it drifted off into a more comfortable sleep.

“Is he dead?” Darbnix cried out. He thumbed his fingers on Slith’s eyelids and frantically rubbed him with shaking fingers.

“He’s not dead,” I promised. “He passed out from the trauma of the event.”

“I thought you said it wouldn’t hurt him.” Darbnix scanned my eyes with worry.

“It probably didn’t hurt.” I shrugged. “But vomiting is not fun for anyone.” My lips curled into a grin.

Darbnix stared at me and then his lips began to stretch into a smile too. Joy was infectious across the board.

“Well, on the bright side,” I said with a chuckle as I pointed down at the slimy food wrappers in a pile that just shot out like a cannon from Slith’s gut, “he won’t be hungry for a while.”

Darbnix laughed and shook his head. “I will have to do better at keeping an eye on him, I guess.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip for a few seconds as I scrutinized Darbnix. His jaw line was handsome and strong. His dark skin gave him a mysterious aura that made my heart pound.

We stood up at the same time. Darbnix gave me a saucy grin. “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Really?” I hated how surprised and desperate I sounded, but I only cringed at my private emotions on the inside.

Darbnix laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll still pay you for your veterinary services.”

“So, are you saying that the meal is like my tip?” I flirted.

“Yes.” He nodded with a chuckle. “You could say that.”

“How could I refuse such a charming offer?” I said. Why not? There was no harm in sharing a dinner and conversation with an attractive man with whom I had instantly liked. The evening was young, and I could always go back to lock up the office later. Everybody deserved a little leisure time now and then, including myself.

CHAPTER 3

DARBNIX

"It's not very often that I get to entertain myself with dinner guests as lovely and educated as you," I mentioned to Dr. Rand as we casually walked back up the steps into the main part of the palace.

She blushed and tossed her long, silky, red braid off her shoulder and down her back. "Well, if we're going down that road, it's not every day that a charming prince invites me to dinner in his floating palace in the sky."

She giggled. The sound of her laughter was soothing to my soul. Her smile was genuine and her eyes were eccentric, warm, and kind. I'd never seen that color gray before, in her eyes. It was almost as if I could get lost in the way she stared at me.

She certainly was witty and charismatic too, not like all the rest of those debutante women out there who fell all over their heels and each other, desperate to impress me and my brothers. Dr. Rand wasn't looking for approval, and that made me enjoy her company even more.

"I can assure you, we will have quite a feast tonight." I chuckled and stepped aside to allow her entrance into the palace first.

"Well it's a good thing I skipped lunch today," she playfully joked. "My appetite will be enthusiastic."

"Come with me," I told her and dared to place my hand on the small of her back. I wasn't trying to be overly flirtatious. I was merely coaxing her along.

I did, however, have a slight ulterior motive. I wanted to feel the heat of her body radiating against my palm. I inhaled a deep breath. She was quite attractive, and I found myself getting turned on by the way she floated down the hallway.

"Here we are," I told her as we approached the great hall used for dining.

I never came in here to eat alone. This room was reserved only for lavish gatherings and elite parties.

But tonight, ah. Tonight, I would be willing to make a special exception for the guest who saved my beloved watch-lizard's life.

"We are eating in there?" Dr. Rand's eyes grew huge as she scanned the room, clearly observing the events unfolding as if she were witnessing someone else's life and not her own.

I laughed at her adorable assumption that she wouldn't be important enough for the occasion.

"Please, Dr. Rand," I beckoned her. I pulled out her seat next to mine at the head of the table. I intended to be a chivalric gentleman. "It's the very least I can do for your services. Without you, poor Slith would still be whimpering miserably down in the basement while I fretted over his wellbeing."

There was a twinkle in her steel-gray eyes as she glanced up at me, sizing me up. It was clear that she was trying to determine my motives. Perhaps she had a stain on her past where she experienced some kind of heartbreak. She was hesitant at first, but with a little gentle nudging, I was able to get her to sit down at the expansive table.

"The servants will be along shortly to bring us our courses," I explained.

"How many will there be?" She took a sip of ice water from a glass already waiting for her.

"Five," I told her with a grin.

She spat a little of the water back into her glass and blushed, sheepishly setting it back down on the table. "*Five?"*

I laughed. Her surprised behavior was too cute not to feed into. "I told you, princes eat well around here."

She chuckled. "Tell me about it."

It excited me when she blushed because her cheeks turned the same vibrant color as her hair.

"So, have you always had a love for exotic animals?" I was curious to get to know her better.

She smiled. "Yes. I know it might sound a little crazy, but sometimes, I feel like I can relate to animals better than I can to actual people."

My heart flipped. I touched my hand to my chest. "I share that same viewpoint when it comes to my own life."

She giggled and bit her bottom lip. She leaned over the table. "Really?" She stared at me as if she couldn't believe I would say such a thing.

"Absolutely." I nodded as the butler brought in our first course, which was a special blend of plants and vegetables that came from my youngest brother, Prince Rawklix's, nation of the Solarin Islands.

"Wow." Dr. Rand inspected the bountiful salad with amazement. She glanced up at me with her mouth agape. "What is all this?"

"These fruits and vegetables come from my brother Rawklix's islands. They grow wild there. It's simply beautiful."

"It's . . . edible?" she asked.

I laughed. "Of course it's edible, Dr. Rand."

She gave me an embarrassed look. "Sorry. This is all a little"—she trailed off and scratched her

braid—"new to me."

"Please," I said with a warm smile. "Don't worry about it."

"Thank you." She grinned at me in earnest as she placed her napkin in her lap. "And please," she added, "call me Rose."

I was truly honored by her friendly gesture. She was not only pleasing to the eye, but joyful company as well.

She picked up her fork and waved it in the air. "Well, lucky for you, Prince Darbnix, I came with an appetite and I am open-minded when it comes to trying new foods."

"That's wonderful news," I told her with a smile. "You're going to absolutely love the little red fruit there."

She took a dainty bite and began to chew, pondering the taste. "You know what?" she said as she gulped down the bite. "It's actually delicious."

I gave her a sultry wink. "I told you."

She cleared her throat and batted at her mouth with her napkin. She had full red lips that fit her facial features to perfect proportion. It was a sexy balance to her cream-colored skin and her red hair.

"I have to confess something," I told her as soon as we were finished eating the salad and waiting for the next dish, a soup of something or other, to arrive.

Rose gave me a guarded glance. "Uh-oh." She chuckled nervously. "That is never a good sign."

I laughed. I felt as if we'd already broken the ice back down in the basement when she'd brought back Slith from the grip of death.

I took a deep breath. "I am supposed to be using this . . . *gadget."* I downplayed the function and use of the genetic compatibility scanner.

Rose laughed, though I noticed the tone was laced with a thread of distaste as well. "I know all about those devices."

"To be honest," I mentioned, "I am having a difficult time with it."

"Why is that?" Her eyebrows rose. Her interest was curious.

I shrugged. "I question its reliability, for one."

"But your brother—" she started.

"Was lucky," I scoffed, unintentionally cutting her off.

She smiled. "So, the grass is not always greener?"

I paused and frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't follow."

Rose waved her hand in the air. "Forget it. Just a ridiculous Earth expression."

Language barriers were just part of the territory in dealing with different races from various planets, but for the most part, I prided myself on being able to communicate throughout the galaxies.

“The technology is new,” I explained. “Therefore, there are cracks and flaws still being discovered.”

“Do you have the device with you right now?” Rose glanced around curiously, as if she were waiting for the object to float out of some kind of orbit and land on the table in front of us.

“It’s up in my private quarters,” I said bitterly. “I don’t like to have it with me unless I absolutely have no other choice.”

The soup course came and was set in front of Rose. She eyed it hungrily, as if she wanted to devour it. “It kind of reminds me of potato soup,” she said as she brought the spoon up to her mouth for a taste.

I gave her a quizzical grin. “Is that a good thing?”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded vigorously. “I love potato soup. Especially on a crisp fall day.”

Everything she said was making me more intrigued by her. I wanted to get to know her. I wanted to know her likes and dislikes. I wanted to pick her brain about her exo-livestock veterinary career. Sometimes, my excited imagination got carried away and I had to remind myself to calm down and take things slowly. I found humans interesting, and the one sitting next to me was particularly captivating.

“It’s very beautiful on the continent I rule over,” I mentioned as my lips cracked with a nostalgic smile.

Rose’s eyes lit up. “What is it like there?” she asked with enough enthusiasm to power the palace.

I wiped my mouth with my napkin. “On Noor?” I perked up. “You would love it. Especially if you have a love of farm animals.”

“I really do.” Rose gave me a dreamy stare as if she wanted me to elaborate and continue.

“There are vast hills and plains that stretch as far as the eye can see.” I glanced at her with a mischievous grin. “And the sunsets? They are to die for. A particularly spectacular event each night.”

Rose’s eyes gleamed. “It sounds magnificent.”

“It is,” I said with pride. “The farm land is heavily cultivated, but unlike here on Earth, the rural parts are laced with beautiful ponds and streams.”

“Do you visit them often?” Rose asked. She had hardly touched her soup because she was so deeply engaged in conversation with me. I found her compelling as well, but her attention to detail about my life really amped up my ego.

“Ah, yes.” I nodded. “Absolutely. They are so refreshing.”

“I noticed that you have lots of pictures of watch-lizards around your palace.” Rose gestured around. “You must be quite fond of the species.”

“I am, indeed,” I admitted. “In fact, as a hobby, I breed and raise watch-lizards. I have a couple of

them that I keep with me here in the palace, but back home, I have far more." I smiled proudly.

"That's very interesting." Rose nodded as her eyes studied me.

"Slith is my sidekick," I confessed. "I appreciate what you did for him back there more than you know."

"Don't mention it." She blushed again, making me harden in my pants. "I can tell you have an enormous affection toward him."

"I just need to make sure that I keep him out of the food pantries," I teased lightheartedly.

Rose erupted into laughter that sounded like windchimes. "That will be a great start."

"I'm really enjoying our private meal together," I confessed. I wasn't afraid to be honest with Rose. If anything, she probably enjoyed the compliment from a rich prince.

"Me too." She glanced down at her soup bowl and sighed. "I don't know how I'll ever get through three more courses of food though."

"We can always just skip the rest and go straight for dessert," I crooned in a borderline flirtatious way.

Rose met my gaze and my bones tingled with unrecognizable pleasure. "Life is short. Eat dessert first. That's what my grandmother always used to say."

"A very wise expression. I will have to agree." I chuckled.

"Who needs that high-tech device tonight, right?" she said bravely.

I appreciated her confidence. "Exactly. I'd rather choose a mate based on the chemistry between us rather than whether we have genetic compatibility."

Rose wrinkled her nose. "It just sounds so . . . scientific."

"Tell me about it," I scoffed.

Rose pointed to her chest. "And that's coming from a scientist!"

I laughed. She was cute and sassy, but she was also extremely intelligent. It was a charming combination that had me hooked for the moment.

"It's not romantic to stick a metal device in someone's face to determine whether they have the DNA capabilities to bear you genetically perfect offspring." I chuckled.

Rose roared with impulsive laughter and clenched her belly. "Stop." She waved her hand as she chuckled. "You are too funny."

"Thank you." Now it was my turn to blush. Rose had an effect over me that I couldn't pinpoint, but I was having a blast getting to know her and bantering back and forth.

Once Rose's laughter subsided, she gave me a seductive stare. "I think it's important to find someone based on personality compatibilities," she mentioned.

My eyes narrowed with intrigue. “I couldn’t agree more, Dr. Rand.”

She frowned and playfully pouted. “I thought I asked you to call me Rose?”

I shrugged and gave her an evasive grin. “Dr. Rand sounds very attractive, you know.”

She groaned but her lips curled at the edges. “I hate being so official and formal sometimes.”

She had natural beauty that I admired, both inside and out. I was full, but it wasn’t the food in front of me that was satiating me for the moment. Before Rose’s arrival tonight, I’d harbored some kind of internal thirst that I was having difficulty in quenching.

If things could work out for my brother Gardax, then why couldn’t I have the same lucky streak and find a woman who really made me happy? I knew it was just a pipe dream and that I’d eventually have to pluck that device out of the bottom of my drawer where I’d tucked it away for now.

Part of me just wanted to be able to enjoy and live a normal life. Unfortunately, as a prince, I was always going to be in the limelight. I didn’t care what that damn genetic scanner told me. I wanted a strong, respectable woman to stand by my side. If I was going to be able to rule my continent, I needed to know I had someone always at my back, and that foundation could only be built on natural mutual trust.

“You are quite young to have your own animal hospital,” I said with praise.

Rose looked delighted with my compliment. “I did work hard, but I just have such a love for the animals that need help that it helped me get through the grueling parts.”

“You mean, like the studying all night parts?” I chuckled.

“Exactly.” Rose rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t always sunshine and roses, but I somehow got through it.”

“I have to admire someone who has the discipline to get through medical school,” I told her. I raised my glass. “To all the exo-livestock doctors of the world,” I toasted. “But you are the most important one.”

“I saved your watch-lizard.” She laughed, going along with the game.

“And I will be forever in your debt,” I told her with a light bow.

“Nonsense.” She frowned. “I was just doing my job.”

“You have a very important job.”

She laughed and absentmindedly twirled the stem of her glass in concentric circles on the table.

“To be honest, I haven’t treated very many watch-lizards. I guess now, I can add that to my resume.” She smiled up at me. “I still have a lot to learn about them.”

“They are a very interesting species,” I admitted.

“I love their colors.”

“One of their best features.”

Rose yawned and then immediately apologized. “I’m so sorry.” She blushed. “I have been up since five o’clock this morning. I had to perform an emergency surgery on a Quambat. It’s a tiny little rodent that looks like a bunny. I forget what planet it hails from.”

“What was wrong with the poor little bugger?” I asked.

“It had gotten its leg stuck in a tiny metal rod. When it tried to free itself, it broke its leg and the bone was poking through.”

“Oh, dear.” I frowned. “Did he make it through the surgery?”

Her expression brightened. “Like a champion.”

“That’s wonderful.” I smiled, truly touched by her talent.

“Anyway,” she said with a regretful shake of her head, “I hate to dampen our lovely night, but I really must be going back home now.”

I was disappointed, but I couldn’t deny her request to go home. I didn’t want to exude any type of domineering behavior.

“Of course,” I said politely. “Again, thank you for accompanying me for dinner. It would have been dull without you.” I pointed to my staff, pretending to be bored by their company. The joke worked, and Rose giggled.

I tried to hide the loneliness I was feeling but I was afraid it escaped through my eyes anyway. To quickly recover, I stood up and walked her to the door.

“The shuttle will bring you back to the ground,” I assured her.

She gave me a hug, which I wasn’t expecting, but I welcomed the touch of her body pressed against mine.

“Thank you again for a wonderful evening, Prince Darbnix,” she whispered.

“You are welcome,” I croaked and swallowed hard.

As I watched her walk through the door and close it behind her, I tried to fight off the empty void that sat like a bowling ball in the pit of my stomach. How was it possible for me to already miss her when I hardly knew her?

CHAPTER 4

ROSE

Once I was safely back on solid ground and at the veterinary office, I climbed into my car in the parking lot with a grin on my lips and a rosy blush in my cheeks. I was giddy, floating on the clouds.

When I woke up this morning, I never could have dreamed that I would have been sharing a fabulously decadent dinner with a Trilyn prince while hovering above the city. It was a bit daunting, but thrilling and fascinating at the same time.

As the trees whirred past me on the ride home, I kept reliving those little priceless moments. I giggled when I remembered something funny that Prince Darbnix said, or a way he gazed into my eyes and made me feel melty on the inside.

I remembered how the floor of the palace gave the appearance of being bottomless, scattered with windows that spread across the surface so that you could see how tiny the city looked from up in the sky.

Rooms had disappeared into each other instead of through doorways. Passageways became something different everywhere we walked. It was exhilarating to be a part of that experience, even if it was just for one night.

That was the problem. It was just for one night. I'd gone to the floating palace on a mission. I'd been invited because I needed to save Prince Darbnix's watch-lizard. I'd fulfilled my duty, and he'd invited me to stay for dinner. It was a black and white issue. Sure, we'd had a lovely time getting to know each other, but what was going to happen next?

I knew about those little scanners they had to use in order to find mates. He hadn't used it on me, claiming his annoyance with the process. The gnawing issue was that in the end, he'd have no choice but to trust it as reliable. If I wasn't a match for him, which hadn't been determined yet, then our friendship couldn't blossom into anything more.

I didn't want to go down that path of disappointment, especially since I'd had such an enjoyable time looking into his dreamy eyes. He was so dark and mysterious, almost ethereal.

I pulled into my driveway a few minutes later, home at last. I vowed to learn everything I could about watch-lizards in the event that he might call me back. You never knew what could happen. Perhaps the lizard would need a follow-up visit, or maybe I'd even use that as an excuse to go back to the palace

just to have even a few more minutes of quality time with the prince.

Walking into my house, I scraped my hand across the motion sensors to flicker on the lamps. In an instant, they brightened up my living room. I looked around. Everything was perfectly pristine and in the same condition I'd left it this morning when I had left for work.

I relished in keeping a tidy home. I didn't have room in my life for clutter. I was too busy. When I came home from a hard day on my feet caring for sick animals, I wanted to be able to relax. My home was my haven.

My house was simple and humble compared to Darbnix's floating palace. I couldn't even imagine how amazing and gigantic his real one must be back on his home planet. He had mentioned at dinner that he was the ruler over a continent on Trilynia called Noor.

Apparently, it was covered in farmland and bountiful rivers and streams. It sounded like a peaceful, serene, and magical place. I sagged into my couch with a dreamy sigh. I imagined myself on Noor with Darbnix. I knew it was a fanatical and ridiculous assumption to imagine that I could ever be in that situation, but my mind wanted to wander tonight.

Darbnix and his chiseled muscles would be leading us on Abromeets. Abromeets are like giant horse-type animals that hail from Trilynia. We would be perched on top of the animals, walking as the sun sets. I pictured the soft breeze tickling my cheek. I would smile and gaze over at Darbnix who would be giving me a stare of adoration.

I could get lost for days in his pale aqua-colored eyes. I shivered with pleasure as I squeezed my eyes shut and imagined us hand in hand, walking through his lush farmland. It had to be a sign of some sort. We were both raised in the plains. We both loved livestock and the lifestyle of caring for animals.

Prince Darbnix even bred and raised his own watch-lizards. My eyes jolted open. I sat up in a flurry and jogged over to my computer, switching it on. The overhead lamps in my private office were off. The only light was the bluish glow coming from the monitor screen.

I had promised myself to prepare and learn as much as I could by researching watch-lizards. I wanted to know everything about the beloved pets of Prince Darbnix. Did I have some underlying reason for doing so?

Maybe because I wanted to impress him? It wasn't likely that I would come across an opportunity to care for another watch-lizard unless it belonged to him. They were a rare breed. I found them fascinating, much like the prince. He was charming and charismatic and had me under some kind of infatuation spell. I never wanted to pop the gleeful bubble I was drifting in.

I shook my head and sighed, rubbing my temples. It was late. I needed to snap out of it. I could always start my research on the lizards tomorrow. I needed rest. Reality could come crashing back down on me under the light of a fresh new day.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE UP FEELING REFRESHED AS I STRETCHED AND TUMBLED OUT OF BED. THE

morning sunlight spilled into the room, giving the day a healthy glow. I walked to the bathroom and began twisting my hair into the same signature braid I liked to wear. It was easy to maintain. With the lifestyle I had, I didn't have time to nurse a mop of hair on my shoulders that weighed me down.

My thoughts drifted back to Prince Darbnix. His handsome smile lurked in the private corners of my mind. I couldn't eliminate the idea of laughing with him over another lavish meal. It was official. I was crushing hard on the prince from another planet.

How could this be happening to me so quickly? I wasn't naïve. I had a good head on my shoulders and I'd been independent all my life. I didn't understand why I was suddenly so enthralled and wrapped up in a prince, who up until a day ago, didn't even know I existed. It was simply infatuation.

I walked to my kitchen and prepared myself a cup of coffee, enjoying the glorious scent of the ground beans wafting through the air. I leaned up against the side of the counter, waiting for the timer to beep so that I could pour myself a cup. Coffee was my drug, the one way I could awaken my senses and be able to function throughout the day.

I turned on my computer, remembering that I was excited to leap into broadening my knowledge of watch-lizards. I pulled up the wealth of information I had at my disposal, one of the perks of being an exo-livestock veterinarian.

Through a little curious digging, I determined that watch-lizards were common on Darbnix's planet. Most of them were smaller than Slith. He was apparently an exception. Most were the size of birds or small rodents. They came in an array of different colors, with scaly lizard-like leathery skin that glistened like gems.

They were omnivorous, which I already knew. They mainly ate fruit, plants, and rodents, but I did come across a few studies that showed they also enjoyed non-consumable products like couch cushions, pizza boxes, and the like, which would explain the problem Darbnix had with Slith. Their main purpose was for patrolling royal palaces. If they sensed the threat of a predator, they would begin roaring and screeching loudly to alert their owners.

The species was generally friendly and curious, but Slith was significantly larger than most of them.

My phone rang, causing me to jump at least an inch in the air. The sound was shrill and alarming. I fumbled on the desk to find it. My heart pounded when I noticed whose number was displayed across the receiver.

Prince Darbnix was calling me.

This could only mean one of two things. Maybe he missed me and wanted to hear my voice again. Or there must be a problem with Slith. Why else would a prince waste time out of his valuable and precious day to call me? It just didn't make sense.

"Hello?" I breathed into the receiver expectantly. "This is Dr. Rose Rand."

Why was I talking so formally? I knew it was him. We'd exchanged numbers last night. It was probably one of his staff members calling me to discuss the bill or something.

"Hello, Dr. Rose Rand." His saucy voice was already deep, powerful, and full of zesty flirtation.

My heart leaped in my chest again. “Prince Darbnix? Is everything okay with Slith?”

“He’s a resilient, tough little guy.” The prince laughed into the phone. “Thanks to you, he is en route to a speedy recovery.”

“That’s great news,” I said as I sighed with relief. “What can I do for you then?” I was confused, yet hopeful.

“I was calling because I have a proposal for you,” he chimed excitedly. There was no sense of faltering confidence in his voice.

“Oh?” I perked. I wondered if the word *proposal* would have the word marriage attached to the front of it, but I kept that part to myself.

“If you will entertain the idea of being a part of my company,” he added, “this dull prince from a faraway land?”

I laughed. “Of course. I’d love to. And you aren’t dull in the slightest.”

“Thank you. That’s a relief to hear.” I knew he was only appeasing me. It was a hilarious assumption to think that a prince would ever care what a lowly commoner’s opinion of him might be.

“Are you kidding?” I played along. I twirled my hair around my finger and propped myself up against the wall like a giddy teenage girl. “You have a floating house with a see-through floor.”

“I aim to impress,” he retorted with a chuckle.

“That much is certain.”

“So, one more time for assurance—you are saying yes to breakfast, am I right?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” My lips formed a wide smile that stretched across my face. “You can count me in for sure.”

“Wonderful.” He sounded genuinely happy at my declaration.

“On Earth, we call Sunday breakfast brunch, depending on the time of day,” I mentioned just as a casual afterthought.

“That’s very interesting,” he said with a chuckle. “I feel like I’m learning more and more about your culture every day.”

“Well, I am also immersing myself in things of your world,” I admitted. “For instance, right before you called, I was researching information about watch-lizards.”

“Were you?” He sounded impressed.

“Yep.” I nodded and smiled, now moving about my house as if I were floating. “They are interesting creatures for sure.”

“I sure have a soft spot for them,” Darbnix admitted.

“I’m really relieved to know that Slith is on the mend,” I said.

“Thanks to you,” Darbnix said in an affectionate tone.

“Just make sure to keep him away from couch cushions and pizza boxes,” I teased.

Darbnix erupted into laughter. “I’ll be sure to do that. I’m actually going to spend the next several days attempting to train him not to eat packaging and other inedible items.”

“I wish you the best of luck in your attempts.” I giggled. “Let me know if you need any help. I am a trained veterinarian, after all.”

“Ah. You speak the truth,” Darbnix said humbly. “I would welcome any help I could get with the little rascal.”

The way he spoke about Slith was pure. I knew it was an affectionate love between a man and his pet, almost like a dog and a person. Man’s best friend. It radiated from Darbnix in the gleeful way he spoke of his eight-year-old watch-lizard.

The more I talked to Darbnix, the more enticing he was. I was certainly attracted to him and his ocean-blue eyes. Every time he laughed, a current of pleasure rippled through me. It was something undeniable. The chemistry had already been sealed, but I still was unsure of how to move forward with him.

What if I wasn’t his match? Then all this effort and flirtatious banter would be for nothing. I needed to keep my wits about me and always have perspective at the front and center of my thoughts. The last thing I wanted to do was set myself up for disappointment.

I’d been in relationships before. Since I was still single, I tried not to wear my heart on my sleeve or expect too much out of a partner. I was busy all the time, going out there to make something of myself. My career was important to me, and I rarely allowed hurtles to get in my way.

But with Prince Darbnix, all my cares disappeared. I forgot everything except for the two of us engulfed in charming conversation. He made me feel more special than I probably was, and that was alluring. He was tempting, and I was eating from forbidden fruit by humoring him with attention. I couldn’t bring myself to cut our ties completely. I was thirsty for him and needed to quench it immediately.

That’s why I said yes to breakfast on Sunday. I craved his attention, his eyes searching mine. I wanted to see him again in the flesh, to stare at his darkened skin and solid muscles.

“Well, I wish you good luck, and I can’t wait for breakfast on Sunday,” I told him. “I can’t imagine the spread of food your staff will have waiting for us to devour,” I joked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said with a laugh, “but I can assure you it will be profoundly delicious.”

“That much is a certainty.” I smiled as I walked up and down the hallway between my bedroom and living room. “What time should I be ready?”

“My shuttle servants will be at your house at nine AM sharp to pick you up,” he explained.

I nodded. “I’ll be ready.”

“I can’t wait to see you again,” Darbnix squeezed in.

My heart flipped. A wavy sensation began to rise in my belly and spread to my limbs. “Yeah,” I whispered as I nibbled on my bottom lip. “Me too.”

We hung up, and the euphoria continued to dazzle me for a few minutes. His masculine voice lingered in my eardrums. Was I dwelling too much on a superficial crush? I owed it to myself to be cautious, but I wanted to live in the protective bubble of my fantasy too.

I walked to the sink and began absentmindedly washing out my coffee cup, lathering the sponge beyond what was necessary. My hands were full of soap and suds as I stared out the window.

My mind lingered on my parents, wondering whether they would have been impressed by the down-to-earth rancher prince from a different planet. Would they have liked him? I wanted to imagine that much to be true.

I giggled, daydreaming of introducing my humble farmer father to the prince with the giant pet lizard. Much like myself, my parents had been animal lovers all their lives. I was a Kansas girl at heart, and my roots and background ran deep and would always be a part of my personality.

I believed I could bring something to the table and would make a favorable match for Prince Darbnix, but unfortunately, the decision wasn’t up to me. I sighed and shook my head. I couldn’t dwell on the past or the future. I needed to live in the present. The future would iron itself out, eventually. In an attempt to get on with my day and submerge myself in distractions, I took a shower and headed to the veterinary hospital. I would undoubtedly have a schedule packed with animals in need. That was the name of the game. I had responsibilities to live up to, and being starry-eyed with lust for a farming prince wasn’t going to keep me focused on my tasks.

It sure was fun, though, to imagine a world completely built on fantasy and the preposterous hope that one day, Prince Darbnix might be mine.

CHAPTER 5

DARBNIX

I sat in my office, my mind still reverting to Rose every now and then. I had completely forgotten about the letter from Davon, but as I glanced around, I found it sitting on a stack of other papers. I had been so completely wrapped up in my new friendship with Rose that my obligations and responsibilities had temporarily vanished from my mind.

I glanced at the letter. It was the same one I had ignored after being distracted earlier when things went awry with Slith's health. Whatever was inside this letter would need immediate attention. He was our computer crimes expert. He worked with the planetary governments' intercontinental law enforcement division and he was the best in the business at his job.

I knew that whatever material resided within the unopened envelope would be pertinent, probably something I didn't want to hear, see, or deal with. Davon was smart, bordering genius. He was nerdy, and we liked to poke fun of him on occasion, but it was all playful and never malevolent.

He was lanky and scrawny and had jet-black hair that was always a sloppy mess on top of his head. I knew that I couldn't put off whatever information he had to relay. I had to bite the bullet and rip open the envelope. With a sigh and a prayer, I did just that.

If Davon were aware of some kind of central intelligence to brief me on, then I would need to be fully aware of the risks at stake. Ever since the incident with my brother Gardax and how his scanner had been compromised, we'd had to take every precaution and safety measure to protect our computers.

My eyes drifted over the contents in the letter, absorbing the information. Davon needed to reach me to discus a possible hacking attempt of the Trilyn computer system. I groaned and rubbed my aching temples.

I plucked my phone from the desk in my private office quarters and dialed Davon immediately.

"Its me," I said gruffly once he answered. "What do you have for me?"

"Hello, Prince Darbnix," he said pleasantly. "Is there somewhere we can meet to discuss my findings?" His voice came out robotic. He had worked with computers for so long, he was beginning to sound like one too.

I looked up to see what time it was. "Is it not something that we can just discuss over the phone?" I asked.

There was a brief hesitation from Davon on the other end, but he finally relented to my request. "Certainly, Prince Darbnix."

I plopped down into my office chair, allowing my body to sag into the cushion. "So," I began. "What do you have for me?"

Davon was wired with the training of a special agent. He was able to pick out even the faintest trait of something being amiss with our computer system far before anyone else would notice a problem.

My brothers and I respected him, but more importantly, we trusted him. If there were an issue, he would be the first one to sniff it out and hunt down the source.

"I have reason to believe that a local high-profile computer criminal may be targeting the Trilyn system," Davon began.

"In other words, you think a hacker is in our midst?" I asked.

"Correct, Prince," Davon answered.

"What intelligence have you received or discovered on your own to support this claim?" My interest was piqued. I needed to know more on the subject, and more importantly, how to protect myself from falling into one of the victim categories.

"I have reason to believe that this hacker is attempting to tamper with the genetic scanners," Davon stated gravely.

"Great," I sighed. "Not again."

"Unfortunately, we may be facing the same kind of ordeal as Gardax went through," Davon stated apologetically.

"Just give it to me straight," I told him. I was a little dubious about the whole subject, especially since we'd ensured that this sort of thing would never happen again.

"Can I meet you at your conference room at the palace?" Davon asked. "I can lay out everything I have gathered on the hacker and the criminal activity I have noted thus far."

"Sure. Whatever you need to do, Davon. I'll be here, waiting."

"Fantastic," he exclaimed, which was out of character for him to show excitement.

"Should I round up my brothers first?" I asked, hoping that wouldn't be the case because our palaces were hovering above different cities. It wouldn't be an impossible challenge but an annoying hindrance.

"I believe time is of the essence here," Davon stated formally. "If I could just get to you first, because we are already in the same location, then you can relay the information to them once we've discussed everything?"

"Okay. That sounds like a good enough plan to me. I'll see you shortly then."

I hung up the phone and walked around my office, watching the doors and walls fade away as soon as

I got too close to them. Then, when I would walk away, they would reappear.

A nervous feeling hung in my gut like a bowling ball. I tried to pacify the feeling by imagining Rose's smiling face and her beautiful red hair. She was delightful to talk to, and the conversation seemed to flow effortlessly when I was with her. She made me feel happy, like I could forget all my problems and responsibilities.

Slith wobbled into the room and glanced at me curiously. He licked his lips as he jumped onto the desk and wrapped his tail in a little coil behind him. He stared at me expectantly until I plucked a flower treat, which I kept waiting for situations just like this, in my pocket.

I chuckled. "Here you go," I said with a smile as I watched my beloved watch-lizard happily chomp on the treat.

A few minutes later, I got word that Davon had arrived. I walked across the palace to the opposite side of the house where my private conference rooms were. You had to enter the room based on eye-scanning technology and then a final step was a fingerprint scanner. Only once a person made it through those specific protocols would they be granted access to the private chambers.

Davon had such security clearance, and he was already waiting for me in the room when I arrived.

"Hello, Prince Darbnix," he said in greeting and gave me a beaming smile and a jovial bow. His mustache hung proudly on his upper lip, something he refused to ever shave. It had become his trademark.

I gave him a polite nod, but I was anxious to cut through the small talk and receive answers. As much as I enjoyed Davon's company, whenever I was graced with it, it unfortunately meant that there was an issue to resolve.

"Tell me what I need to know," I requested. "Brief me and catch me up to speed."

"Of course." Davon nodded professionally and laid out his slides to present on a projector.

A woman's face splashed across the screen. She had white-blonde hair that was worn in a chic bob kind of cut. Her black dress formed to her figure perfectly and her neck and ears displayed expensive, flashy-looking jewelry. She appeared to be young, vivacious, and trendy.

"Who is that?" I furrowed my brow curiously and pointed to the screen. I wasn't expecting him to show me pictures of a cute young female.

Davon sighed somberly and placed his hands behind his back, interlocking his fingers. "This," he said with animosity as he nudged his chin to the screen, "is our perpetrator."

"Her?" I frowned in disbelief. "She looks like she's on her way to walk a red carpet or a runway at a fashion show."

"That's the worst part," Davon agreed with a chagrined nod. "She's a snake in the grass. She wants us to believe that she's just this cute and sassy woman, but underneath, she's sick, twisted, and very dangerous."

I shrugged. "Okay. Well, how do you know this?" I asked.

Davon's eyes lit up with bright pride. "It is, of course, Prince Darbnix, my job to discover any flaw I can in the design of the genetic scanners meant for each of the Trilyn princes."

"I know this already," I retorted, possibly a little too impatiently. I softened my gaze. "I'm sorry," I told him and waved him to continue. "Please, finish."

Davon inhaled a deep breath. "This woman is named Julia Morse. She is a thirty-year-old electronics engineer," he explained.

"Okay . . ." I said with trepidation. "What has she done to make you suspect her?"

"I am afraid that she may have also discovered a flaw in the genetic scanners," he explained regretfully with a frown. His lips curled in frustration. He moved to another slide that showed Julia working diligently over some kind of computer device that I didn't recognize.

"She must be smart," I mentioned casually.

"Extremely intelligent and one step ahead of us," Davon said with a shriek. I stared at him, startled by his outburst.

"It is quite possible that she has created an exploit which she plans to use to manipulate whom the princes marry," Davon continued.

I leaned back in my seat and stared at Davon, pretending that this was just an unfortunate coincidence and that he was probably just being misdirected in his findings. The only problem? Davon was rarely, if ever, wrong about anything.

"That woman," I mentioned and wagged my finger in Davon's general direction while he stared at me and waited for me to elaborate. "Darla. The one who was arrested last year. Is there any connection?" I raised my eyebrows.

Darla had meddled with the scanners and my brother Gardax had been her bait. This situation sounded suspicious and conveniently tied in with what had happened with my brother.

There must be more electronic rats trying to infiltrate our systems and obliterate our opportunities to succeed in this mission, which angered me. I cracked my knuckles as a way to release some of the hostile aggression I felt.

Darla had attempted, unsuccessfully in the end, to hijack the scanners to create a fraud against Gardax. She'd used our uplink to the Trilyn main computer network to get her slimy job done. From there, she had been able to hand-pick herself as Gardax's bride even though she hadn't been a match for him.

"Is she one of Darla's counterparts?" I asked.

Davon hesitated but eventually began to nod. "I'm afraid so, Prince Darbnix," he responded in a soft whisper. He scratched his mustache. "I'm still trying to locate all the information I can from the source so that I can infiltrate the network and find the answers."

I nodded. "Right. Well, it sounds like you are doing the best you can," I mentioned as a way to boost his confidence on the subject.

“This woman.” Davon pointed at Julia. “I’m afraid she is extremely dangerous if we don’t try to stop her before it’s too late.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded. “That’s where you come in.” I pointed at him and gave him a smile. “But please, let us know if there is any way we can aid you in your efforts,” I added.

“Of course.” He bowed gratefully.

“Julia is the ambitious type of sociopath who will use her resources to work against us,” Davon explained. “We must keep a watchful eye on her.”

“Absolutely.” I nodded somberly. “Thank you for informing us of what information you do have, even if it’s not much to go on right now. At least we know what kind of behavior and issues in the computer system to look out for, right?” I chuckled nervously.

Davon’s expression brightened with understanding. “Yes, Prince Darbnix,” he said.

I knew that he had the intelligence and resources of his own to get this Julia woman. It was only a matter of time before we found her flaws and used them for our own benefit.

“I want to take her down and destroy her,” I murmured under my breath. I had mainly been stating it to myself, but Davon grinned as I noticed that he had heard me too.

“Yes sir.” He nodded. “That is exactly what I intend to do.”

I stood up. “So, you really think you have a handle on her agenda? Is she working directly *for* Darla?”

Davon shook his head regretfully. “I’m sorry, Prince Darbnix,” he explained. “I don’t have that information yet as to whether she is working directly for Darla in this case.”

“Oh,” I said, a little disappointed.

“But I am working on it,” he assured me.

“Good.” I gave him a satisfied smile. “Alas, that’s all we can do, right?” I walked over to him and gave him an affectionate pat on the back.

“Right.” He seemed both elated and uncomfortable by my gesture.

He frowned and wrinkled his forehead. His mustache twitched. “I’m just a little frustrated at the moment,” he confessed.

“About what?” I paused to study him.

“I wish I knew all the answers to exactly what her plans are,” he explained.

“I know.” I took a deep breath. “At least you have the red flags in place. Now we can just be on higher alert.”

“Her agenda will be a sinister one,” Davon admitted. “Regardless of whether she is working directly for Darla, or perhaps just a copycat. You see these villains doing that sometimes. It’s common for more of them to come out of the woodwork and try to become the hero for their kind after another one

of them falls short or fails completely. In this case, that would be Darla as the fallen hero. Julia might be looking to rise from the ashes and finish the job that Darla never could."

"It sounds atrocious," I admitted with a wrinkled nose.

Then I thought about Rose again. Her beautiful face flashed in front of my vision as if she were an oasis in a desert or a premonition of my future. Could she be my mate? What if my scanner had already been tampered with? If I pointed it at Rose, would it light up? Or *should* it light up, but it's been fixed to point to someone else?

The uncertainties rattled and infuriated me. I needed answers. Did my heart secretly want my match to be Rose? In the private recesses of my mind, I wondered if I was falling for her, even though we had just met. We had undeniable chemistry, and every time I was around her, I felt a euphoric peace swirl around me. I didn't want to be consumed with a starry-eyed crush, but I was afraid I was tailspinning in that direction. That was one of the things I hated most about these damn scanners.

If they were supposed to point us to our genetic match but we fell in love before then, what would happen? Gardax had gotten lucky to be matched with his soulmate. Would my brothers and I also have that kind of luck? Or would we strike out? There were so many answers floating out there that made me wary of the entire process.

"I appreciate how diligently you are working on this for us," I said with a professional nod toward Davon. "Without you, we wouldn't even know this little issue had arisen."

"My ultimate goal is to take her down," Davon snarled as he glanced venomously at the picture of Julia happily smiling on the screen.

I stared at her. She seemed nice enough, but smiles on the surface sometimes never gave away the sinister behavior lying underneath. If she was truly a snake in the grass as Davon explained, she must be taken down, and quickly.

"Again, I'm sorry that I can't provide you with a better wealth of information at the current moment," he said with an apologetic frown.

"It's okay." I waved his embarrassment off. "You are working on it, and that's all that matters."

"Thank you for your reassurance, Prince." Davon's smile was warm and genuine.

"Just let us know when you have more information, will you?" I asked as we exited the conference room and prepared to part ways.

"Absolutely." Davon nodded enthusiastically. "You will be the first to know."

"I promise to catch my brothers up to speed as well," I mentioned as I led him to the exit.

Davon extended a hand to shake with me. "We will be in touch then, okay?"

I smiled. "That sounds perfect."

I didn't want to reveal to Davon the cracks and flaws I was afraid of. Here we were, in another compromising position with these scanners. They were seeming to be more trouble than they were

worth, but we still had the pressing matter at hand back at home. We needed genetic matches, and the situation was dire. A lot was at stake and our planet was in jeopardy. Unfortunately, some of these dirty humans knew of our vulnerabilities and used it to try and sabotage us. I wouldn't be another statistic. I vowed to take these minions to the ground, no matter the cost.

CHAPTER 6

ROSE

The ground below began to fade away into tiny, spectacular dots underneath me as I took the shuttle up to the floating palace belonging to my new friend, Prince Darbnix. I still had to pinch myself that this was my life.

A few days ago, I was just a veterinarian living a standard, seemingly ordinary routine. Now, here I was, getting ready to enjoy a fancy breakfast held at the private invitation of one of the richest princes in all of Trilynia.

Not that I took time to even entertain whether he was rich. It was an added perk, a bonus, for sure. I would be silly to deny that my heart didn't flip every time I envisioned myself waltzing around a ballroom adorned with crystal chandeliers in a custom-made dress with frills, lace, and all the finest luxuries that money could buy.

Alas, a girl could dream. I knew that Darbnix had his doubts about the genetic scanners and their capabilities for working properly, thus he wasn't ready to use it on me. I didn't mind the attention, and I would just enjoy his devotion while it lasted.

My career had offered me many benefits over the years, including a decent place to live that was safe and secure. Financially, I wasn't a royal princess or anything, or wealthy by any standards. I did well for myself and was proud of my accomplishments.

I could dip myself into the affluence of Prince Darbnix's lifestyle and hope that it lasted for as long as possible, at least into the afternoon.

"We are here, Madam." One of the shuttle officers gave me a charming grin with lips stretched enthusiastically. He wore a shuttle jacket with the Trilyn crest displayed on the back, portraying the fact that he was with the transit authority.

"Oh," I stated with a return smile, startled out of my delirious thoughts about the unlikely possibility of Prince Darbnix sweeping me off my feet. "Thank you."

The kind transit worker took me by the hand and helped me to the ground by way of a set of pop-out steps leading to the palace. As soon as we arrived at the front gate, it disappeared in front of us. I walked through to the entrance foyer where I was greeted by the handsome smile and bright eyes of Darbnix.

“Hello,” he said and trotted over to me. He planted a kiss on my hand, making me feel dreamy.

“Hello,” I managed as I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “Thank you again for having me over for breakfast.”

The prince laughed. “The pleasure is all mine.” His eyes had a mischievous twinkle in them as he waved me along, beckoning me to follow him. “Come,” he said. “I am sure you brought your appetite?”

I rubbed my flattened tummy. “Absolutely.”

We arrived in a different dining area than we had before. This one was in a conservatory room, completely encased with floor-to-ceiling windows and a glass floor.

“Wow,” I said, completely mesmerized by the view. “This is incredible.”

“I know.” Darbnix beamed proudly at the compliment. “This is one of my favorite rooms in the palace.”

I drifted around the place, staring in complete awe at the world below, spread with miles of farmland and green spaces, blue sky stretching as far as the eye could see. In front of me, there was a canopy of stars as the blanket of the atmosphere and its beautiful spectacle of the universe in front of us made the world seem truly magical.

“Its breathtaking, really,” I whispered, thoroughly impressed.

“Just wait until you see the breakfast treats.” Darbnix chuckled with amusement, seemingly fascinated by my delighted reaction to the conservatory.

I laughed. “I have no doubt you will be ready to impress.”

“Please, take a seat.” He gestured to a glass table with iron chairs tucked neatly underneath. He scooted one out for me and cast me a warm smile.

“Thank you.” I nodded with a blush as I took the seat that he had pulled out for me.

He sat across from me, and almost at once, a butler of some sort, wearing the same kind of formal servant clothes that were maroon and soft yellow, appeared from behind a stretch of wall.

He greeted us politely with a gracious bow. “Good morning, Madam, Prince.”

“Good morning,” Darbnix stated kindly. “As you can see, I have a very special visitor joining me for breakfast.”

“Indeed, she is quite beautiful.” The servant gave me a smile with a little dimple in the side of his cheek.

“So, what is in store for me today?” I asked and propped my elbows up on the table, giving Darbnix a dreamy glance as I cradled my chin in my hands.

He glanced at his servant. “Thomas will be giving us delicacies from your own farmlands,” he said with a smile. “Fresh fruit, custards, scones, and muffins.”

“Yum.” I grinned and began to salivate. “That sounds delicious.”

Darbnix moved out of the way so that Thomas could place the trays of food onto the table in front of us. “And of course, a little sausage and eggs for protein.”

“Of course,” I said with a giggle after he winked at me.

“Ah, look who has come to join us,” Darbnix bellowed and pointed in the direction of the first glass wall that disappeared as soon as someone, or in this case, something, crawled through its quarters.

“Slith!” I proclaimed and instinctively jumped from my seat to hurry over to the dazzlingly purple animal’s side.

I blushed with embarrassment, turning to face Darbnix before petting the lizard. “Um, this is okay, right?” I asked sheepishly.

“Of course.” He nodded and chuckled with amusement. “Don’t be shy. Slith is very friendly.” He watched as I placed my hand on the back of Slith’s shoulder and began grazing my skin against the cool scaly skin. It reminded me of a snake, soft and delicate to the touch, quite soothing.

“He likes me.” I grinned.

“You saved his life. Why wouldn’t he?” Darbnix smiled.

Our eyes met while I continued to pet the watch-lizard. “He seems curious,” I mentioned.

“He’s curious enough to eat unconsumable items,” Darbnix joked.

“He seems to be fully recovered,” I noted.

“Thanks to you.” Prince Darbnix’s adoration and gratitude for what I did for his beloved pet shone through his eyes like a lighthouse beckoning a lost boat to the shore.

Our eyes met and locked, and tremors of desire pulsed through my veins. I blushed and looked away. I didn’t know how in-depth I should take this relationship, especially since I had yet to determine whether I was a genetic match by his scanner’s standards. We might both be wasting our time. But then again, I was enjoying the joyful banter of his company.

“Do you mind if Slith joins us for breakfast?” Darbnix requested as Slith took a few strides toward his master. He crouched under his feet and curled his tail behind him, looking satisfied and contented as he closed his eyes. He rested his chin on the prince’s shoe.

“Not at all,” I said and smiled, wandering back to my seat. “Everything looks delicious,” I mentioned again.

“Please.” Darbnix gestured to the food. “Dig in.”

I placed some blueberries, strawberries, and eggs on my plate. Everything looked fresh as if it had been hand-plucked from the fields that very morning. The eggs were fluffy and sunshiny yellow. I took a bite, savoring the way the flavors melted in my mouth.

“Mmm,” I cooed. “Very tasty.” I swallowed the bite and dabbed my mouth with the cotton napkin in

my lap.

“A beautiful breakfast for a beautiful woman,” Darbnix mentioned as he gave me a flirtatious gaze.

I blushed. I was certain by the way my cheeks flushed with heat that I was probably turning a rosy shade, giving away my private emotions. There was no surprise that we were attracted to each other, but how far could it go? How long would it last before my bubble was popped?

“So,” he said as he brought his water glass up to his lips and stared at me over the rim. “What does a farm-loving girl like yourself like to do for fun?”

I leaned back and gave him a playful grin. “Well, having breakfast with handsome princes in their glass conservatories is very top on my list.” I giggled.

“How often do you actually do that?” He laughed lightheartedly.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, right?”

“Indeed, there is.” He raised his glass for a toast. “To new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings,” I parroted, but inside, I had a terrible feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach.

I was afraid of the scanner and whether we would be a biological match. I fantasized daily about what it would be like to have his arms wrapped around me in a loving, tender embrace. I didn’t want to waste my time if he wasn’t the one, or more importantly, I wasn’t the one for him.

I knew that in the end, he would have an obligation to his own race back home on Noor and all the continents on the Trilynian planet. He had responsibilities as a prince, along with his brothers. Not all fairy tales had a happy ending.

“Is something wrong?” Darbnix’s voice pierced through my thoughts. His eyebrows furrowed, and he scratched the top of his head as if he were puzzled about something. He had adorable facial features in the way he fretted over me. “Nothing.” I flicked my eyes down to my plate. “Nothing,” I said a little softer, but I’m sure I wasn’t convincing either way.

“Are you sure?” He pressed as he gently cupped his dark-toned hand over mine.

I slowly raised my chin, meeting his gaze. Our eyes locked and my breath was captured. “I’m fine,” I assured him with a sheepish smile.

“You just look melancholy about something,” he said and cleared his throat, taking another sip of his water. Then he smiled with glee. “I have a natural talent for reading people’s emotions.”

I chuckled. “Oh, is that a fact?”

“I could tell that something was wrong with you,” he said in a somber voice.

I placed my fork down on my plate. “Okay, fine.” I chuckled nervously. “You got me. I am worried about that scanner.”

“The genetic scanner?” He raised his eyebrows and paused, mouth open.

“I didn’t think you’d be surprised.”

Darbnix shrugged. “To be honest, I had completely forgotten about that wretched thing.”

I tried to smile through his constant need to appease me with a joke, and I respected him for it. I just felt a little unsettled.

“How about I distract you?” he offered.

“That sounds fantastic,” I breathed out, relieved at his suggestion. “Thank you.”

“For one,” he said as he gestured out to space beyond us in the palace, “I think you would really enjoy Noor.”

“Because of the farmland?” I asked.

“Yes.” He nodded. “But also, because the people are friendly and kind there.”

I smiled. I could imagine it wasn’t a far stretch, given how hospitable he’d already behaved toward me.

“What’s it like, coming from a big family?” I asked. I was generally curious to learn about his background, and like he had offered, the distraction from the genetic scanner was nice.

He leaned back in his seat and exhaled a reflective sigh. “You mean, what’s it like to have to share the glory with all my brothers?” His masculine laugh sent shivers of pleasure up my spine.

“Exactly.” I smiled. “I am an only child. I have no idea what it’s like to share anything.”

“Then consider yourself lucky.” He smirked. “I like to consider myself the most down-to-earth and levelheaded of my brothers.”

I laughed and leaned over the table. “I bet they all say that about themselves, too.”

Darbnix chuckled. “You are probably right.”

“So, where do you fall in line, exactly?” I asked.

“I’m the second-born.” He rolled his eyes. “So that naturally means that Gardax will always want to act like the superior warrior.”

“But you get to pound on your little brothers, right? There’s still plenty to go around as far as the metaphorical food chain goes.”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I suppose you’re right about that too. My youngest brother, Rawklix, is a real piece of work. He tries to argue and protest everything that the rest of us brothers recommend.”

I crossed my legs under the table and gave him a grin. “It sounds like you have your work cut out for you.”

He nodded. A sentimental glaze washed over his face. “To be honest, I don’t get together with my brothers as much as I want to. I do miss them, in spite of our differences of opinion.”

“They rule different continents on Trilynia?” I asked with intrigue.

“That’s right,” he confirmed, then a jovial smile spread across his lips. “I, for one, think that Noor is the best continent.”

I laughed. “Well, aren’t you biased?”

“Maybe somewhat.” He shrugged playfully. “I am a rancher at heart.”

I took a moment to notice his movements and the fluid way that his perfectly sculpted muscles moved, so visibly smooth and appealing to the eye. He was carved and ripped in all the right places and it was quite alluring. I stared at him, awed. I hoped he didn’t notice or wonder why I was gawking at him like a school girl with a crush.

“You are really cute,” I blurted out.

“Do you think so?” His eyes lit up like a candle illuminating the darkness.

“Yeah.” I blushed. “Sorry. I thought that might be kind of obvious.”

“Maybe a little,” he said with a humble nod.

“Maybe someday, I can visit Noor with you,” I suggested. Even if we weren’t a match, it didn’t mean that we couldn’t still be friends. I don’t know how well that would work for me, though, because even the thought of Darbnix with someone else made my skin crawl and my stomach churn in a sea of unrest.

“I would love that,” he admitted. “After all, I’ve seen your home. It would only be fair that I return the favor.”

“Yes, well, I don’t exactly have a floating palace to park in the fields above Noor,” I teased.

“We could get you one,” he said in a chipper voice.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” I said with a playful roll of my eyes.

Darbnix gazed out the window again. The atmosphere and the space beyond stretched out to eternity. There was no limit to what could be accomplished way out there in the vast realms of space.

“There is nothing more peaceful than strolling through the farmland and appreciating the terrain, crops, and beauty surrounding you when you are on Noor.” He wasn’t looking at me but staring off into space as if his vivid imagination was enchanting him.

“I know the feeling,” I admitted in a whisper. “I used to love to sit on my grandmother’s porch, drinking iced tea in mason jars while we shared stories and talked about our dreams.” I sighed and glanced at Darbnix. He was staring at me with genuine interest in my story.

Slith sat up and stretched, yawning as he curled out his massive pink tongue. He slid over to me and pounced up onto my lap where he perched proudly. He was a little big for me. Our sizes were not exactly as proportional as if he were sitting on Darbnix’s lap.

“Come here, you silly lizard.” Darbnix laughed and patted his own knee, beckoning the animal. He

glanced at me with embarrassment. “Sorry, it’s just . . . well, he likes you. He has good taste.”

I blushed. “Thank you. Really, its all right. I don’t mind.”

“Are you sure?” He frowned, unconvinced. “Slith can be kind of heavy.”

I smiled. “I think he just wants one of my blueberries. Can I share?” I looked up to Darbnix for approval.

“Sure.” He smiled. “Go right ahead. You might be baiting yourself to be his new best friend though.”

I laughed. “That would be just fine with me,” I said in a mock baby voice as I spoke directly to Slith and patted him on his scaly purple head.

I plucked a blueberry from my plate and offered it to Slith, holding it out in the palm of my hand. Slith’s tongue immediately slurped it up. He swallowed the fruit and smacked his lips gratefully.

“Slith also has a knack for pointing out the honest humans,” Darbnix admitted with a smile. The way he glanced at me made me feel woozy and electric inside.

“I love animals,” I admitted. “What can I say? It’s the reason I became a veterinarian.”

“Well, I can speak firsthand. You are profoundly talented at your job.” Then he leaned over the table. “What were you saying before? About your grandmother and the porch?”

“Ah, yes.” I nodded. “My grandmother lived on a farm. Wheat was her crop. It stretched golden across the land. It was like running through sunshine. The wheat was so soft against my skin, and tickly. I’d play hide and seek among the wheat with my cousins. It would stretch out so tall that it would tower over us. But once I got older, I loved to spend evenings out there on the porch, sharing stories and watching the sunset with my grandmother before she passed away.”

Darbnix was staring at me as if I were the most elegant, enchanting person on the planet. “What a fascinating story,” he marveled.

“I shrugged. “It might be simple, but it was the dream of my childhood. I still keep it tucked away in my memory for safekeeping.”

“As you should,” he said and stood up. “Come here. Follow me.”

I did as he asked and wandered over to the window with him. “This is where you get the best view,” he mentioned.

I looked down and out, around the panoramic views displayed in front of me. Clouds floated by as if they were cars just passing by on a highway. “Magical,” I whispered.

Darbnix wasn’t looking at the sky around us, a deep blue color. He was staring directly at me with lust-glazed eyes.

“You’re very pretty,” he said and hesitantly moved his hand up to delicately push my braid off my shoulder. It was as if he were afraid of being denied the privilege to touch me, as if I were a figment of his imagination.

“Thank you,” I whispered in a throaty voice that was unrecognizable to my own ears.

My heartbeat pulsed through my ears, making everything sound loud and quiet at the same time. My fingers and toes went numb as Darbnix wrapped his arms delicately around my waist.

I did the same, snaking my arms around his strong, burly torso. He felt so warm and inviting, as if he were the safety net I had been searching for.

His lips touched mine, and I tingled inside. A melty, gooey feeling consumed me. I sighed with contentment, allowing myself to meld into him. His lips were hungry as they skirted across mine. His tongue explored my mouth, and we devoured each other with frantic desire.

It was certainly an impulsive moment for me. Even after I pulled away, the touch and taste of his skin lingered on my lips and mouth. I wanted to lock this moment in my memory forever. I was reeling, and the world blurred around me. My fantasy had come true, but I never wanted it to come to a bittersweet end.

CHAPTER 7

DARBNIX

It took a night of traveling, but all of my brothers finally relented and agreed to come to my floating palace in Topeka. Even Gardax graced us with his presence, being back on Earth for a few weeks to assist in making sure there were no other pressing issues with the genetic scanners.

"Thank you all for being here," I said. My hands were clamped around my back as I walked around the enormous conference table currently seating my six brothers. I was standing and drifting across the room as they stared at me expectantly. "It means a lot to me. I know you all have very busy schedules to attend to."

"Well if you know that, then get on with the story," my brother Manzar groaned with a roll of his eyes and a dismissive flick of his wrist.

"Easy, now," Gardax bellowed. "Everyone will get their turn to speak."

"Thank you, big brother. How very kind and noble of you." The youngest of our brood, Rawklix, crooned with sarcasm, his most well-known personality trait.

"Its hard to ascertain how much time we've already lost by arguing how much time we *don't* have to sit here around this conference room table," my brother Akrawn interjected gruffly.

"All right," I sighed. "Enough."

Ulbrite, one of my youngest watch-lizards, slinked into the room and jumped onto my shoulder, where he perched and glared his yellow eyes and sunshine-colored body in the direction of my brothers.

"Does that *thing* really have to be in here with us?" Akrawn protested, pointing a derogatory finger at Ulbrite.

"For your information, he is young and needs lots of tender care and affection," I fired back defensively, stroking my beloved pet's back while he purred in contentment much like a cat would.

"Whatever." Rawklix rolled his eyes, leaning back in his seat with a squeak.

The meeting was not going as planned, but on the other hand, what else could I have really expected from this bunch? We were brothers by race and blood, but we often suffered disagreements. It wasn't until just recently that we'd had to spend a more substantial amount of time together, engaged in a

harmonized union for the greater benefit to save our planet.

“As you know,’ I stated calmly, “I would never summon you here if I didn’t have an alarming reason to.”

“So, what *is* the problem, exactly?” Rawklix pressed, raising his eyebrows at me in a doubtful manner. “Did one of your animals chew off your manhood or something?”

The rest of my brothers erupted into laughter. Even Gardax, who was the more serious of the group. Rawklix slapped his palm against the surface of the table, utterly smitten with himself and his ability to get a rise out of everyone.

I squared my jaw. “No,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “I received a letter from Davon.”

That was enough to shut them up. Silence filled the air. I now had each of my brother’s grave and somber attention.

“What did the computer cop have to say?” Manzar asked. He propped his elbows up on the table and leaned closer.

I glanced over at Gardax. He was staring at me inquisitively, with caution flushing his cheeks. If anyone had experienced the ramifications of a computer hacking event or anything that would raise a red flag with our devices, it was Gardax. He had lived through a terrible ordeal, and I’d done my best to prevent him from marrying the wrong woman.

“As you know,” I continued, “the biological scanners are quite vulnerable.”

“The flaws have been fixed,” Gardax mentioned as a stiff reminder.

I gave him a look but ignored his comment. “Davon has reason to believe that there is another suspect running out there who might be trying to infiltrate our computer systems and compromise our devices.”

I hated to admit such grave information, especially without a solid concoction of hard evidence, but I knew it was best and wisest to get the juices flowing among my brothers. The sooner they were aware of the potential problem, the sooner they could start tracking any subtle clues of their own as they continued the search for mates.

So far, Gardax had been the only one of us who had found his match. That was probably why he was such an advocate for the genetic scanners in the first place, but he had to remain open to the possibility that they were still hackable.

“What exactly did Davon say to you in this letter?” Gardax narrowed his eyes as he studied me.

“The letter didn’t say much.” I shrugged. “I got the feeling he wasn’t willing to discuss the matter in great detail over open communication. We talked on the phone and then I had a briefing with him yesterday.”

“Without us?” Manzar cried in disapproval.

“Davon was already in my area, and he wasn’t willing to delay the meeting,” I mentioned casually as

if there was no foul play up for debate here.

“Well, what happened?” Akrawn raised his hands and gave me an impatient stare.

“Davon gave me a name,” I admitted. “A woman.”

I presented my brothers with a digital photograph of Julia Morse, the woman in question.

“This is her?” Rawklix raised a cynical eyebrow as he pointed to the picture. “She’s hot.” He winked at me and playfully nudged Manzar, who was sitting beside him.

Manzar grumbled and plucked the photo from Rawklix’s grasp.

“Who is she? She looks young,” he observed.

“According to Davon, she’s a thirty-year-old electronics engineer. Her name is Julia Morse.”

“Okay,” Gardax said. “So, what does that mean? What exactly has she done wrong?”

I glanced around the room of disbelieving brothers. “Well, I, uh . . .” I stammered. I wasn’t exactly going to be crowned Mr. Popularity by this tough crew.

“Get on with it, brother,” Manzar groaned in a grumpy tone.

“There isn’t a foundation of solid evidence yet to convict her of anything,” I mentioned.

“Nobody was asking you that,” Akrawn reflected. “What evidence does Davon have to suspect her of something?”

“He’s just a silly, lanky nerd,” Rawklix chastised with a bellow of a laugh, returned mainly by Lortnam, twin brother to Jinurak and co-ruler of Norna. Norna was the most resource-rich continent on our entire planet.

“His opinion is still valued,” Gardax admitted, then glanced at me. “Continue with your elaboration, Darbnix.” He gestured with a roll of his wrist in my direction.

“As you all know,” I continued as I cleared my throat and sat down so that I would be at eye level with the rest of my brothers, “Davon is first in command when it comes to addressing any computer crimes that might pop up.”

“Right,” Gardax said and shifted his weight, fully engaged in the conversation.

“Anyway,” I continued, “he has reason to believe that this Julia Morse woman has unfortunately discovered the flaws in the genetic scanners.”

Gardax wrinkled his nose. “How on earth could she possibly do that? And more importantly, who is she?”

“Please,” Jinurak roared with frustration. “Let the man finish.” He pointed at me.

“I hope it’s not a copycat situation.” Lortnam frowned.

“Me too,” Jinurak agreed. He and his twin almost always operated on the same level. It must have

been a twin thing.

“Darla used the device in order to manipulate it into reading her as the false-positive match,” I reminded the group with an apologetic glance in Gardax’s direction. It didn’t matter. We’d discovered the error in the device and had the creator make sure something like this would never happen again. Gardax was eventually matched with his true love, Amy Allen, and the pair had been enjoying a blissful life as a married couple ever since.

I didn’t know whether my brothers and I would be lucky enough to find true love like that in our matches, but I did my best to dream. My mind would occasionally drift to Rose and her charismatic smile and her carroty braid that gave her features even more flair and personality.

Her company was enjoyable, and I had yet to use the device on her for fear about its reliability. My doubts were further heightened by this new information from Davon. I hated the fact that we couldn’t just find our match based on true love or chemical attraction, but unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. Due to the substantial factors involved, it was nearly impossible to mate with any random human. They had to be a perfect biological match in order for mating to be something that was plausible.

“Darla can’t be behind this incident,” Gardax professed. “She’s still in prison for her crimes.”

I nodded. “Davon didn’t have enough evidence to pinpoint any direct relation of Darla’s crimes to those presumed of this new Julia Morse person.”

“Then why are we sitting here?” Rawklix threw his arms up over his shoulders, clearly exasperated. “It sounds to me like this meeting was a waste of time until we have something to charge this cute blonde woman with.” He ended his little speech with a dashing smile with an open-mouthed set of pearly-white teeth.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “Will the lot of you just let me finish? There is a lot at stake here, and I’m afraid that none of you are taking this seriously.”

“Fine.” Rawklix pursed his lips sourly. “What else do you know about this Julia woman, and how do you and Davon plan on taking her down?”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “No one is taking anyone down right now,” I explained.

There were snorts and scoffs heard around the room. “Then what are we *doing* here, wasting time?” Rawklix proclaimed.

“We need the scanners . . .” Manzar trailed off in an argumentative tone.

“Yes, I know we still need the scanners in order to create the necessary relationships with these earthen women who will make us capable of producing children . . .” I trailed off, now thoroughly understanding that I didn’t have a single chance at convincing all of my brothers that we might have a problem on our hands to deal with.

“What about Davon?” Akrawn exclaimed.

“What about him?” I narrowed my eyes and focused on him.

Akrawn shrugged and chuckled, glancing around the room. “What I mean is, can we even fully trust

him?"

"Of course we can trust him," Gardax interjected. "Why wouldn't we be able to trust our computer resources officer?"

"I don't know," Akrawn argued. "Can we trust *anyone*? Can we even trust each other?"

There was bickering around the room. I finally had to put an end to it. "All right!' I roared across the table.

I finally received the silence and the attention I had been yearning for since this meeting started.

"We can trust Davon," I said. "We need him. If there is an infiltration into our computer system, then the best way to stifle or stop it altogether would be Davon."

Gardax looked at me with a skeptical expression which floored me, especially after the ordeal he'd had to endure with his own genetic scanner being compromised.

Rawklix was still scowling at the end of the table. He had a look of sheer boredom upon his face as if this meeting didn't interest him in the slightest.

Akrawn's features softened. "I suppose we need to take every cautious measure and follow every lead to ensure that the same issues with the scanners don't happen again like they happened to Gardax."

He pointed to our oldest brother, who glanced around the room as if he were surprised to be in the spotlight.

"No." Gardax shook his head. "We need the scanners. I found my match, and all of you will too." He gave me a stern look as if he didn't want to debate the subject any further.

I heaved a deep sigh. I was ambitious about this problem, and I would just have to obtain leads from Davon myself until the threat could be neutralized.

"Fine," I finally relented. "We will table the discussion for another day. We will continue to utilize the genetic scanners until each of us has found our one true scientific match."

Gardax looked pleased. "Great." He stood up, clapping his hands together. "I must be off, my brothers. Until we meet again?"

The rest of them followed suit, mumbling their goodbyes to me along the way. After they left, I remained in the room, mulling over how poorly the meeting had gone. It seemed as if we'd reached an impasse for now. I had the support of about half of my brothers, while the other half remained adamant that we must continue to use the scanners to find our genetic matches.

I understood the importance of the devices. Our biological welfare was on the line here, and we had a lot at stake if this didn't work out. I was distrusting of engineers who had the means and capabilities to hack into our system, though, and now Julia Morse was at the top of that suspect list.

Innocent until proven guilty, yes, but something was unsettling about the situation. She didn't sit well with me, and Davon wouldn't have approached me unless he really thought that the threat was

imminent.

I vowed to research into Julia's background as deeply as possible, digging until I found the root of the problem or any solid evidence to back up Davon's claims. I sighed again and stood up, walking somberly around the room.

I missed Rose and her appealing smile. She was the one I really wanted, but I was afraid to turn on my scanner for fear that she might not be my match. The whole concept had been diligently worked on and brought to life by our most astute and intelligent Trilyn scientists, but were they poorly executed and flawed?

One might wonder if the answer to that question was yes, but I didn't have enough to go on right now to completely ban them from use by my brothers, or even myself, for that matter. There were engineers out there who were fully capable of hacking our system and compromising a wealth of vulnerable information.

I was worried, but I couldn't do anything about it until I had concrete evidence. I left the conference room and walked back toward my private quarters. I needed to sleep. Maybe after that, the light of a fresh new day would breathe new life into the situation.

Perhaps Davon would hit a dead end and maybe he would realize that his suspicions had no weight or merit in the end. Then why was I hoping and praying that he would discover a hacker?

Was I so cynical about the devices as a whole that I was compellingly drawn to the idea of finding any solid way to back up my reasoning that the devices are flawed and unnatural? Why couldn't I just go out there in the world and find my one soulmate, my one true love?

I squeezed my eyes shut. Unfortunately, it was never going to be that simple. The DNA had to be a perfect biological match in order to discover a woman who was even capable of providing a child to myself or my brothers.

I was stuck, for now. But as I closed my eyes, I visualized Rose and her perfect strawberry lips and delicate, genuine smile. Her long braid flowed naturally down her back like silky ginger perfection.

I imagined her creamy hips on top of me, straddling me as she pressed herself into me. My insides throbbed and craved to kiss her again. My heart raced, and I jolted awake. It was only a dream, much to my disappointment. The sensations and the yearning were real and natural.

I wanted to see her again. It was my new mission, to get to know Dr. Rose Rand as much as possible. I trembled inside at the vivid imagination of her hand grazing over the tip of my manhood.

I pulsed with desire as I pictured her with a mischievous grin, opening her mouth between my legs. I groaned and cringed, needing a way to cool off from my wild imagination. For now, there was nothing I could do but wait and see where the tide brought me. In the meantime, I would keep my scanner turned off, where it remained locked away in a drawer until I could muster up the bravery to bring it out.

I may have my doubts about the device, but my passion and longing for Rose were as real as the breath in my lungs.

CHAPTER 8

ROSE

"Dr. Rand? You have a call on line two." My receptionist's voice chimed through the intercom system in my office.

I was buried in paperwork at the office. I sighed and rubbed my tired temples. "Thank you," I mumbled as I picked up the receiver.

"This is Dr. Rose Rand," I declared.

"Hello, Dr. Rand."

I recognized the cool, handsome voice immediately. I glanced up and toward the currently cracked door of my office as if I was somehow subconsciously expecting him to walk through the entrance or something.

"Prince Darbnix. To what do I owe this pleasure?" I giggled delightedly into the phone. My cheeks flushed a profound rosy color as a grin cracked across my lips.

"I missed your voice."

"Is that so?" I was dreamy already, intoxicated by the sound of his voice and the dramatic attention he peppered me with.

"I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner at the palace?" His voice rang with hopeful expectancy.

I leaned back in my office chair and began pushing my back against it, making a squeaking sound as the tired old chair began to protest.

"You should start considering what you call dinner to be lavish five-course meals," I teased.

His voice was playful. "We can call it anything you like as long as you are willing to appease me with an invitation acceptance."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." I didn't skip a beat in my response.

"Great." I could hear the enthusiasm in his voice, but also something else that I hadn't spotted before. It was worry, fatigue.

“Is everything all right with Slith?” I asked, curious about the beloved watch-lizard.

“He is as fit as a fiddle,” Darbnix chimed, now peppier. “He bounced right back with resiliency.”

“Good.” I nodded, thankful that I didn’t have to have that kind of worry on my conscience and that he was on a solid road to recovery. “What time should I be ready?”

Darbnix expelled a confident laugh. “Well, if you look outside your office, you’ll notice that my guards are waiting for you, ready when you are to bring you to the shuttle.”

I erupted into laughter. I had not been expecting that one. “Are you stalking me?” I asked. “How did you know where to find me, or that I would even say yes? What if I had plans tonight?”

I was only teasing him, of course. I had no plans other than most likely falling asleep on my couch to an old black and white movie in the same clothes I was wearing.

“I took a guess,” he stated with feigned sheepishness.

“How very presumptuous of you.” I laughed. “Let me just finish up here and I’ll be outside in a moment.”

“I can’t wait.” I could almost see him grinning through the phone.

We hung up, but my heart was racing. I couldn’t wait to be in Prince Darbnix’s gracious company once again. I loved the way he looked at me, as if he was undressing me with his eyes. The attraction I felt for him was undeniable.

His dark skin reminded me of being somewhere tropical. His eyes were stunning and pierced right through my soul.

“It looks like you’ve got company.”

I had been wandering up to the front lobby of my animal hospital, distracted in my own thoughts, when I glanced up and noticed that my receptionist with a normally sleepy and bored demeanor was staring at me with a wickedly curious expression.

My cheeks flushed a revealing shade of crimson. “Oh, right. I, uh . . .” I stammered, trailing off as I pointed vaguely at the very recognizable guards wearing Darbnix’s house crest on their armor.

“Going somewhere special?” she squeaked.

“I’ve been summoned back to the palace to do a follow-up checkup on the prince’s watch-lizard,” I lied. I didn’t feel dishonorable about anything. It wasn’t a far stretch from the truth.

“Okay, well, have a good time.” She grinned at me as if she didn’t believe a single word I said.

“Well, bye.” I waved with embarrassment and shuffled through the door as quickly as possible.

“See ya later!” she called out with playful humor ringing in her voice.

In the shuffle of the moment, I distractedly barreled into one of the guards, bumping into his chest.

“I’m so sorry.”

“No problem, ma’am,” the guard grunted in a civil voice, still staring straight ahead, not out of sheer rudeness but because that was simply his job.

They helped me board the shuttle, and into the sky we rose, whisked into the atmosphere. It wasn’t a long journey, but my fingertips and toes were numb with ample excitement. I wanted to absorb every moment of this reality, pinching myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

Prince Darbnix could have any woman in the world, yet he chose to entertain his options with me. I still had the faint pulsing of dread in the back of my mind, of course, every time I remembered the specific problem of the genetic scanners. It was certainly a hindrance, but as long as I pushed it to the back of my mind, I wouldn’t go into sheer panic mode about my romantic life.

Besides Prince Darbnix, I really didn’t have any other prospects. Other men either didn’t interest me because they weren’t on my same intellectual level, or they seemed superficial. I couldn’t stand either one of those traits in a man and had no interest in entertaining a fling just to keep myself from becoming too lonely.

As soon as the shuttle arrived in front of the palace, the walls disappeared in front of me and I stepped out into the breezeway entering the palace walls. It was starting to get familiar and comfortable, coming back and forth here.

“There you are.” I heard the recognizable and gleeful voice of Darbnix behind me.

I spun around, noticing the flicker of excitement as it flashed in his eyes as he approached me.

“Hi.” I gave him a wave. “Thanks again for having me.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” He placed his hand on the small of my back and leaned down to give me soft kiss on the cheek.

The touch of his lips on my skin gave me a tingly sensation that washed over me and captured my breath. I wasn’t even hungry anymore. A wavy feeling began brewing in my belly and a desire I’d never felt before for any other person faded my appetite, but there was another kind of hunger stirring in my belly.

Darbnix stood up straight and placed his hands behind his back, clearing his throat abruptly. I turned around and noticed that his personal guards were still standing behind us, staring straight ahead and awaiting dismissal.

“That will be all,” Darbnix announced, and the guards disappeared back behind the wall, giving us privacy.

I turned back and grinned up at him, taking in his stature and handsome jawline. His skin was smooth. I didn’t want to ever leave his side. I was in trouble emotionally, allowing my heart to lead me instead of keeping my head level and sensible.

“So?” I smiled. “What is on our agenda for tonight?”

“Follow me,” he said and took my hand, pulling me down a hallway lit with various colored lights pulsing in tiny little round, clear cases up above our heads. It was magical, modern, and a treat to the

senses.

Each hallway we turned down had a set of walls that disappeared into the next, creating hallway after hallway.

“Where, exactly, are we going?” I asked, getting curious.

“I’ll show you,” he said in a mischievously evasive way.

“You like to surprise people, don’t you?” I laughed. I wasn’t scared. I trusted Darbnix with every fiber of my being. I clung to his masculine grip without an ounce of apprehension.

Another wall disappeared, and we were spilled into another room. As soon as I entered, I gasped and glanced up at him.

“Are we . . . outside?” I was confused. It wasn’t farfetched. It seemed like we’d traveled the ends of the earth. It was confusing, the way the walls evaporated into the next, as if we were walking through a maze.

“We aren’t outside, but this is what prevents me from becoming homesick,” Darbnix attested with a proud glance around the vast open spaces. “I like to come in here and reflect. This room keeps me sane, keeps me grounded so that I’ll always remember where I came from and what my ultimate goal is.”

“What is your ultimate goal?” I didn’t mean to be so prying, but I wanted to know where I stood with him, and I suppose that unconsciously, my heart was verbalizing its demands. I wanted to cringe, but I didn’t have time to recover because he answered in an instant.

“To be honest, I don’t want to use that genetic scanner.” His voice was blunt and open as if he wasn’t going to hold back and he was prepared to speak his mind.

“Okay . . .” I trailed off, uncertain how to react or respond to that, but I felt it was probably better to ease my way in with him so that he would be able to vent in his own way.

“So, what is this place?” I wanted to change the subject and get his mind on a different subject than his problems and fears.

His features softened. The ceiling was like a floating sky, serene and baby blue with white fluffy clouds overhead that looked as soft as cotton. Vast farmland stretched as far as the eye could see, and I wondered whether it was just an optical illusion playing tricks on my mind.

Then, before he could answer, I figured it out on my own. “Is this . . . Noor?” I pointed at the landscape and a babbling stream glistening in the virtual sun gleaming overhead.

“It is.” He nodded with a peaceful smile.

“This room is incredible.”

“Thank you. My most highly-skilled engineers equipped me with this room.”

“They are amazingly talented,” I observed, then added, “Do you think that they could come to my house and add a room like this to my house?”

This amused him. He smiled and laughed, brushing the hair off my shoulder. “You are really cute. You know that, right?”

“No one ever tells me that.” I chuckled. “But it makes me feel good to know that.”

“Come on,” he said and nudged his chin to the side of the room. “Let’s go sit by the stream.”

“Okay.” I smiled, following him.

When we arrived at the stream across the enormous room, it looked and sounded real. Water splashed on rocks that looked as slick as glass.

“Go on,” he coaxed. “Dip your feet in.”

“Really?” I glanced up at him, shocked. “Will it feel real?”

“It will.” He smiled with pride. “My engineers are the best on the entire planet of Trilynia.”

I sat down on the ground, feeling the cool soil. I dipped my feet into the water and gasped. It was wet and refreshing, tickling my ankles as the water drifted downstream.

“This is amazing,” I declared. I never wanted to leave this room.

“Thank you,” he whispered. It was then that I noticed a shadow of melancholy and grief flood his features.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, feeling comfortable enough with him to probe about something that would make his handsome features fade into such sorrow.

“My brothers want to ignore my concerns about the scanner,” he whispered softly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said and consolingly patted his thigh.

He stared at my hand stroking his knee as if he wanted to pounce on me in an instant. It made my heart race in my chest.

“It’s not your fault,” he said in a noble voice. “It’s something I have to work through on my own.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I mentioned. “You can talk to me. Maybe I can even help you.” I gave him an innocent smile as he met my gaze and looked adoringly into my eyes.

“I wish more people were like you,” he stated.

“How?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He sighed and leaned back, propping his arms behind him. “Pure. Genuine.”

“There are plenty of people like that out there in the world.” I shrugged.

He scoffed, staring straight ahead. “Not as many as you think.” His features turned a shade darker, bitter.

I didn’t know what was bothering him, but now I was afraid to press the issue. If he wanted to talk to me about his problems, then he would be the one to decide how in-depth he wanted to go with me.

“I don’t trust the scanners,” he said gravely. “I think they are vulnerable, too easily compromised.”

“Do you have reason to believe this?” I asked, casually curious.

He glanced at me. “Maybe.” His jaw squared as he placed his bare feet into the water beside mine.

There was a quiet pause between us, then he let out a labored deep breath. “I don’t want to talk about the scanner anymore.”

“That’s okay,” I said gently and began to rub his back, noticing as chill bumps of pleasure began to follow the grazing of my fingertips across his skin.

“Keep doing that and maybe I’ll forget all of my problems.” He chuckled as he continued to stare straight ahead.

I could tell that he was still distracted by something. “Thank you for bringing me here,” I admitted. “To be honest, I needed the stress relief too.”

He looked surprised. “You did?”

“Well, yeah.” I shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone?”

I had no idea what kind of pressure he was under as a prince, especially a prince who needed to find a biological match to help him produce children. It all seemed so artificial and too rehearsed.

“I guess so.” His expression relaxed and his shoulders loosened. Then a smirk cracked at the edges of his mouth. “maybe I’ll just ignore the issues with the genetic scanner and I’ll adopt one of my brother’s kids as an heir. I’d rather do that than marry someone I don’t love.”

His voice sounded sad and made my heart ache. I wished there was something I could do to help him. His face contorted with conflict. I didn’t respond to his proposal because I knew that he was probably just trying to think out loud.

He turned to face me. “Being out here in the open with you really helps me relax, though.” He smiled. “You know, given the circumstances.”

“I know what you mean.” Desire continued to flow like lava through my veins. I wanted him to kiss me.

Then, as if reading my mind, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. Sensual bliss surged through me. I held my breath, never wanting him to pull away. I wanted the moment to last forever.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gently stroked his hair, raking across his scalp with my fingernails. He grunted in approval. He kissed my neck as if he wanted to devour me whole. I frantically kissed him back with desperate urgency as if I was afraid that he would disappear right before my eyes like one of his palace walls.

A frenzy of emotions ravaged through me. A wetness began to pool between my legs as he stroked my inner thigh, sending me on a wild ride of erotic pleasure. “Keep doing that,” I begged into his ear, praying that this wasn’t just a dream that I’d wake up from before I had a chance to climax.

Every sensation in my body was blazing with desire for him. My insides pulsed with burning longing that I couldn't control. I panted into his ear, moaning softly as he gently pulled my pants down to expose me in the most erotic way possible.

"I want to taste you," he requested.

I nodded. I couldn't form words. My throat was too narrow with hunger for him. I opened my legs, ready to allow him access into my private world. I was throbbing between my legs, sensitive and wet, ready for him to take me.

Darbnix ducked his head between my legs. I gasped as his mouth parted my slit and he flicked his tongue on my magical flower, blossoming with desire for him. I ached for every movement he made with his mouth, struggling to breathe through the pleasure.

My body began shaking with ecstasy. The warm sensation of an orgasm began brewing inside me and an eruption of pleasure shuddered through me. I clamped my legs around his head and dug my nails into his back, wailing with pleasure as the orgasm ravaged me.

Darbnix came up for air a few seconds later, grinning wildly with a mouth glistening and wet from my climax. He pulled his shirt over his head and I helped him fumble out of his pants.

His dark manhood throbbed before my eyes, exposing his thick girth that made my eyes grow huge. I was pulsing again for him, yearning for him to ravage me.

"Is this okay?" he asked in a whisper, diplomatically giving me an option to bow out if I wasn't comfortable.

My cheeks were flushed with a burning, intense heat of raw sexual desire. "It's perfect," I croaked, barely managing to speak.

He pressed himself against me. I cried out with pleasure as he entered me. I shifted my weight to help him plunge inside. Once he was buried deep within me, my soul wept with joy.

He rocked back and forth with fluid, gentle movements at first and then began to go faster and faster as we melded together as one. Being with him felt so natural, as if we were two people interwoven in a chemistry that sent electrical jolts of pleasure and a current of bliss through us.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, digging my heels into his back. He was panting harder and harder as he continued to thrust and pump faster and faster.

Then in an instant, he grunted again, and he emptied himself into me, convulsing on top of me as we became one naked, sweaty mess. He pulled out, the contents of his manhood continuing to drip and ooze out of me with a warm sensation.

I collapsed beside him on the grass beside the stream, gazing fondly up at the sky. If this was what heaven was like, I never wanted to leave.

CHAPTER 9

DARBNIX

Watching Rose sleep lulled my senses, sending me into a dreamy state of relaxation. Her chest rose and fell in perfect rhythm. She was tantric, alluring. Her long red hair flowed naturally around the pillow like crimson feathers belonging to some kind of exotic bird.

She was beautiful, simply stunning. Her cheeks were rosy, and her lips were delicately parted in peaceful, tranquil deep sleep. I leaned down to kiss her cheek as gently as possible, careful not to wake her.

She roused slightly, sighing with a contented moan as she shifted her weight in the bed and moved over to sleep on her side. She didn't wake up. Her eyelids remained tightly shut.

I couldn't sleep, and there was no use in trying to ward off the insomnia or put up any kind of fight against it. I pushed the sheets off my legs and touched my heels to the floor, walking over to the edge of the room where I gazed out at the sky and the vast blank canvas of outer space just off the horizon.

I profoundly missed Noor and the wide-open countryside, but having Rose with me helped comfort me to some degree. I hated being lonely on a foreign planet, even though I was surrounded by dozens of people all the time.

No one else had the capability of quenching my hunger—that is, until Rose entered the picture. She was intoxicating. I was already beginning to throb again, just picturing her legs spread for me, glistening and wet, welcoming me into her deepest, most private place.

She fed my need to be stimulated by another intellectual. I didn't care about the fancy parties. To me, they were meaningless. There was no lasting stimulation to pacify my screaming mind.

I hated the idea that I had no choice but to appease some woman out there who didn't care about me and who only wanted me for my money, wealth, and status. I didn't want to find a mate that way. I still believed in doing it the old-fashioned way. I wanted to court a woman like Rose who made my heart pound and made the flesh between my legs pound with desire.

She made me feel impulsive in the most magical way possible. She awakened my senses and breathed new life into my mind, even though I didn't know her that well yet. I enjoyed every moment we spent together, and every time I got lost in her eyes, I never wanted to leave. I wanted to get lost in her gaze because she was pure and mesmerizing.

The moon was high in the sky tonight, glowing and illuminating a milky white light across the landscape of the sky. I took a deep breath and wandered back to the bed. Rose was still sleeping peacefully with a tranquil expression.

I wished that I had the capability to forget all my problems and float away to the oblivion of a dreamy peaceful state. I'd made her come hard, and I relished the thought of doing it again. Hearing her moans through the night made me sizzle inside. I couldn't get enough of her. I was afraid I was becoming addicted, which posed a bit of a problem.

The genetic scanner was still looming in the back of my mind, trying to force its way to the front and center of every consumable thought I had. My heart raced. I didn't want to use it on her. I was afraid of staring the results in the face if she wasn't a viable match.

EVERY FIBER IN MY BODY YEARNED FOR ROSE TO BE MY PERFECT MATE, BUT I WASN'T READY TO HAVE disappointment shatter the fun I was having with her just yet. I wished there were some way I could hold onto her forever, never letting go. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple.

I walked to my office, shuffling along robotically as I journeyed down the corridors, making my way to my private quarters. I was the only person on the planet who knew exactly where to find my genetic scanner, which I'd purposefully hidden so that nobody would be able to tamper with it. I was especially cautious and paranoid now that Davon had proposed a feasible threat by one of the world's most intelligent engineers.

I'd figured that after the whole Darla fiasco with my older brother Gardax, there would be copycats out there. My ultimate goal was now to keep this thing safely locked away. Even though Gardax got his wish in the end and was able to marry his one true love, I didn't trust that I would be lucky enough, nor any of my remaining brothers yet to find their matches.

I was cynical, yes, but I had reasons for my doubts, both scientific as well as having chemistry for one another. How was I supposed to ever perform sexually with a woman I didn't love or felt no stimulating attraction to?

For me, it wasn't all about looks. For one thing, I had to be agreeable to be matched with someone who might not necessarily be the most beautiful woman on earth. As long as her personality shone through, I was willing to let that part go.

I wasn't so superficial that I needed her to be gorgeous, and smart. I knew I would have to compromise on one or the other, but that's where I was running into the most problems. I had issues with not wanting to marry someone I despised just to be able to keep our race going.

How far was I willing to go to breed for my planet? I wasn't sure I had an answer for that just yet. I finally made it to my office. The automatic lights switched on immediately because they were hooked up to motion sensors to detect when someone entered a room.

I sighed and plopped down at my office chair, staring at my computer. My genetic scanner was tucked away in a drawer beside my desk. It was as if it were burning through me. I could feel its energy and

it wasn't even turned on. How could I be so afraid of using an electronic device?

It was because that very device in question was going to seal my fate and held all the power at controlling my future. I was normally a laid-back type of guy who tried to research all options before coming to a conclusion, but these scanners just didn't sit well with me at all.

I was so conflicted that the lines of right and wrong began to blur until I was totally losing perspective altogether. I picked up my phone to dial Davon but then quickly set it back down on the desk again after I realized it was far too late at night to have a reasonable conversation with anyone. I would just have to keep myself company with the thoughts in my mind and wreaking havoc on my wellbeing.

I walked over to the locked drawer where the device was kept. My hands were itching to unlock it, but I needed to work my way up to doing that.

"This is crazy," I muttered under my breath. "It's just a scanner. What harm could it do?"

The answer was a lot, including substantial damage to my emotional state.

My ears burned. My chest pounded under a beating heart that was not prepared in the event that the scanner wouldn't light up when I placed it in front of Rose.

What if I placed the scanner in front of her and it didn't read her as a match, but she really *was* the match? What was the success rate? There was no way to gauge that because Gardax had been the only one so far who had found his mate.

My thoughts shifted into bitter discontent as I pictured him lying beside his wife, Amy, perfectly blissful in his new love. I wanted those same options. It didn't seem fair. I didn't want to sound like a sullen, spoiled child, but I wanted to have my cake and eat it too.

I had a perfectly beautiful woman who was smart and sexy and funny sleeping in my bed at that very moment. Why couldn't I just continue to get to know her and make love to her and see where the ebbing and flowing tide drifted us?

In a hasty huff, I plucked the key from the safety box on the side of the wall and turned it inside the lock until the drawer housing the scanner popped open. I sighed with relief when I noticed that it was still right where I had left it before, untouched and untampered with.

I spun around, hearing a crackling sound as if someone was shuffling around outside in the hallway.

"Who is there?" I called out in a demanding roar. My ears prickled and my senses heightened as I awaited a response.

No one answered. Grumbling with frustration, I spun back around and glared down at the genetic scanner. It was ruining my life, and I had yet to even turn it on or use it on anyone, let alone Rose.

I yanked it from the bottom of the empty drawer and spun back around, noticing the noise sounded closer than it did before.

"Who is there?" I exclaimed again. "Reveal yourself."

My eyes trailed to the floor where a flash of purple whirled past me. In an instant, Slith was sitting in my office chair. His tongue was sticking out and he stared up at me with huge expectant eyes.

"Oh." I placed my palm to my chest to pacify my racing heart. "It's only you, Slith."

I walked over to pet him as he sat up in the chair. His eyes closed as soon as I began to stroke his leathery skin that was as smooth and resilient as a snake's. Slith loved it when I rubbed his head. It relaxed him.

"Tell me something, Slith," I began as if I expected him to give any real verbal answer. I paused. "What do you think of Rose?"

Slith's eyes remained closed. Either he didn't hear me or wasn't in a particular mood to appease me by providing an opinion.

"Dr. Rose Rand?" I declared again as more of a question than anything else. I didn't know whether I was trying to get some kind of reaction out of Slith or I just loved the sound of her name rolling off my tongue.

Slith opened his eyes and they began to glow a radiant purple color, something I hadn't seen before. I began to get excited. "Dr. Rose Rand?" I asked again. "Do you like her, Slith?"

His eyes illuminated through the room, creating a canvas of lavender that made me feel peaceful as if I were walking through a valley of lilac flowers. I imagined being in a field with Rose, naked and full of hope and a heart full of love.

"You like her, don't you?" My lips curled into a euphoric grin. I gave him one last pat, grabbed the scanner, and jogged back up the stairs two at a time, using bountiful strides to reach my private quarters even faster.

As soon as I reached the door to my bedroom, I paused. I didn't know where the hesitation was coming from, but my bravery was fleeing as fast as my heart was beating rampantly in my chest.

Was I prepared to turn on the scanner and use it on Rose? I highly doubted it, but another part of me, a deeper yearning, just longed to get it over with. It would be like ripping off a bandage, I tried to convince myself. Soon, it would be over.

I could know and be done with it. I could either feel the rush of exceeding happiness and euphoria, or I could crash and burn with the results if she wasn't a match. Either way, I needed to get on with my life. I was so distracted with unnecessary worry over the results that I didn't know how to process anything or focus on living my life in the moment.

I pushed the door open and wandered over to the bed. Rose was lying on her back, fully naked and exposed to me. Her perky breasts were round and bouncy-looking. I wanted to squeeze them, to suckle on her tender pink nipples.

I held the scanner in a death grip, white-knuckling the *On* button. My thumb hovered over the edge, too afraid to press down for fear of what results might come with it. I wasn't prepared. I didn't want to live in a world where I couldn't bond with Rose or make love to her or pursue her on a romantic level.

My mind became flooded with dread and fear of the unknown. If the scanner didn't light up, it would mean the end of my relationship with Rose, and I wasn't ready for that yet. I wanted her to be the woman I made gorgeous babies with. If I had to live in an oblivious state of mind for the time being, then so be it.

She must have been able to subconsciously be aware of my staring down at her, because she began to stir, making sexy movements and stretches in the bed. Then, her eyes peeled open and she gave me a tantalizing, ethereal stare. Her brow stretched and furrowed in confusion.

"Darbnix?" she asked. "What are you doing up?" She glanced at the bedside clock. "It's late. Come back into bed with me." Her voice was seductive and making me throb again.

I had been holding the scanner behind my back ever since she opened her eyes. I didn't want her to see how close I had come to actually turning it on and using it on her. It was an insane amount of pressure to put us both under, and right now, I just wanted to make love to her again. I yearned to feel her warm skin sliding across mine in a sweaty, blurry mess of sexual bliss.

"I'm right here," I reassured her, subtly moving the scanner to the end of the bed where I neatly tucked it underneath and out of sight. It couldn't hurt us in this moment. I climbed on top of her as I began kissing her creamy, smooth skin.

Chill bumps appeared on her skin, sending her on a euphoric ride already. I was pulsing with desire as I removed my pants, listening to her quiet moans become more intense by the second. Every time I touched her in a new way, she sighed with approval and pleasure. She arched her back as I rubbed her inner thighs.

I craved to be inside her. I used my index finger to slide inside her, to feel the surge of wetness as it took over her body and formed a puddle on the sheets between her legs.

She was pulsing. It was time. I gripped my hardened erection and pushed the tip of myself inside her. She gasped at my girth. I was thick, filling every part of her.

She grabbed my shoulders and dug her nails into my back, clawing at me in ecstasy. "More," she begged. "Please," she purred into my ears, sending me on a wild ride.

Being inside her was like putting myself into an electrical socket, only the outcome was that of erotic passion.

I grunted, filling her as I pumped harder and faster, our bodies rocking in unison under the moonlight. She was intensely sexy, erotically charged. She took my breath away. She moaned into my ear with mischief twinkling in her eyes. Her stare was intoxicating. Her lips curled into a breathtaking, awe-inspiring grin.

She buried her heels into my back again as I held her hips in place. After a few short minutes, she began to breathe heavier than normal, panting hard as her cheeks flushed in the height of sexual passion. She was positively glowing, radiant beneath me.

Her body began to shake, and then in an instant, she went limp in my arms, succumbing to her passion as her orgasm sent her into oblivion. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she sighed with contentment.

I wasn't far behind her. My body began to shake too, the warm and creamy sensation burrowing within my body and threatening to explode inside her. Euphoria rocked through my core and I groaned as I spilled my seed inside her, warm and sticky.

I collapsed beside her, panting hard as we interlocked our fingers. I never wanted to let her go. I moved closer to her as we lay beside one another in silence, staring up at the ceiling. The only sound in the room now was that of our breathing as we came down from the ecstasy of the moment. It was official. I was addicted to her and I didn't know how I could ever function or survive without her by my side forever.

CHAPTER 10

ROSE

"I don't want to do it." Darbnix's eyes were weary and full of sadness.

"Do you have no choice in the matter?" I rubbed his back as we lay in bed together, furrowing my brow as I scrutinized his conflicted features.

"My brother says the show must go on," he grumbled, sighing as he rubbed his temples.

"I'm sorry. I wish there were something I could do," I whispered gently into his ear.

The truth of the matter was, I hated the situation as much, if not more than, Prince Darbnix. I didn't want him to be put back on the market, presented like a piece of meat to desperate women who would undoubtedly spend their night fawning over him and trying to impress him.

Though Prince Gardax is the eldest brother in the Trilyn clan, Darbnix knew that his obligations and responsibilities would chase him until they eventually caught up to him. They were to hold another public gathering tonight, complete with lavish spreads of decadent foods and people in beautiful expensive outfits as fancy as money could buy.

I was uncomfortable with the pretentious lifestyle, but in my eyes, even though Darbnix was a prince, he didn't fit the description of being huffy and demanding or behaving entitled in any way.

He made me feel wanted, important. He gave me a sense of purpose, and he treated me with kindness, dignity, and respect. He nurtured me, both emotionally and physically, and I privately swooned under his handsome stare. I watched in awe as he moved across the bed, his bulging muscles presenting a spectacular view, a feast for my eyes.

"Just try not to worry about it." My words were weak and hollow. I was becoming rattled by the idea of watching other, prettier women flirt with Darbnix right in front of me.

"I want you there." He turned to face me. His expression was stoic, solemn.

"At the party?" My heart raced. Was I going to be able to handle that kind of pressure? Would I just fall apart if I watched his scanner light up in the face of a girl other than myself?

"Yes." He nodded as a flash of kindness flickered in his eyes.

"Oh . . ." I trailed off, uncertain of how I should tread the waters of this conversation. "I guess I could

—”

“Please, Rose.” His expression faded into a plea that I couldn’t resist.

“I’ll be there.” I took a deep breath and did my best to enhance my smile to convince him I was onboard even if it was only halfway.

“Thank you.” He embraced me, circling his enormous arms around my body. “I will make sure to have my staff provide you with the most elaborate and gorgeous dress that money can buy,” he jabbered excitedly.

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary—”

“I insist.” He smiled, beaming at me as if he already considered me his trophy, but in an adoring way, not as if I were his property to own.

If only I could be his one true love . . .

Unfortunately, that was not our decision to make. The scanner held both of our fates under its cold, gray, plastic cover.

“Are you sure I look okay?” I did a half-spin in my elegant black cocktail dress. My movements were laced with self-consciousness.

“Are you kidding me?” Darbnix said enthusiastically. “You look absolutely stunning.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and leaned in to give me a kiss that made me ripple with desire.

The sound of Gardax’s disapproving throat clearing behind us was a distraction.

Darbnix pulled away and glanced behind his shoulder, giving his eldest brother a perturbed stare. “May we help you?” he hissed.

“We are going to be late,” Gardax insisted, pointing to the watch on his wrist as a reference.

“Fine,” Darbnix snarled aggressively, clearly annoyed. “Come on.” He took my hand and gave me a soft glance of fondness. “Let’s go.”

“You can’t walk into the party with her on your arm!” his youngest brother proclaimed, pointing to us as if we were both crazy.

“He’s right,” Gardax said. “It will confuse the guests.”

“I don’t *care* what it looks like or whom I puzzle in the process,” Darbnix protested.

“No . . . really.” I was the first to unlatch my hand from his. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.” I’m sure my smile was pitiful, but it was the most I could muster for the moment.

Poor Darbnix looked torn, but in the end, he relented and agreed to walk into the horde of waiting people alone, into a shark tank of hungry women ready to devour him at every turn.

Right before he walked out into the spotlight, entering the ballroom, Slith walked up to me on his four purple legs, hissing.

“Is he all right?” I asked, concerned.

Darbnix turned around and eyed his pet companion. “He seems protective at the moment,” he mentioned.

“Let that beast go.” Gardax rolled his eyes. “He’ll be fine without you for an hour.”

“I’ll watch him,” I offered.

Darbnix’s eyes were relieved. “Thank you,” he breathed. “Slith really likes you. He trusts you.”

“Great,” Prince Rawklix, the youngest of the brothers, droned on in a bored voice. “Let’s get this over with. I have ladies to meet and charm with my sizzling personality.” He gave me a wink.

“The only lady you need to be pursuing is the one who lights up under the point of your scanner,” Darbnix quipped back in a lecturing tone.

Rawklix gave him a sneer. “I could say the same thing for you, Brother.”

I blushed and glanced down at my feet. I wasn’t used to the attention or wearing such an elegant dress that flowed like silk down to my feet. My feet were strapped into a pair of six-inch silver heels. I struggled to walk in them. I was feminine, but I’d never considered myself to be the girlie girl type.

As far as Gardax was concerned, he still gave me attention and gazed at me as if he adored me, making me blush even further.

I forced myself to bravely watch as he shuffled through the crowd, mingling with various women. To my relief, it appeared as if he was bored, just robotically going through the motions because he had no choice in the matter.

I noticed as he eventually stood in the center of the room along with his brothers. His facial features were hidden as he scrutinized the device in an attempt to turn it on. I held my breath as the first woman approached him with a deep and respectful bow.

Her eyes were dazzling and flirtatious. She had a self-confidence that I envied. I didn’t even realize that my jaw had been tensed for several minutes until I began to feel the throb and ache.

I unconsciously began to rub my cheeks while my eyes rooted onto the woman, my heart pounding in anticipation. I was sweating as I aggressively stroked Slith’s scaly purple back, unintentionally making him uncomfortable because he slinked away for a few moments. Then he returned and sat in a different position, sitting proudly beside me as if he took the liberty of being my noble sidekick and accepted his role with diligent seriousness.

“It’s okay,” I whispered to him in a soothing voice as if the animal was the one who really needed the consoling. “It’s going to be okay.” It made me feel better to chant the words over and over again to

myself.

It would all be over soon. Or maybe it wouldn't. Perhaps I was overreacting. There was a chance that the match for Darbnix wasn't even in this room at all. Maybe he'd strike out tonight, and I would have a chance to prolong this relationship for a little while longer, clinging to the desperate hope that I might be his biological soulmate.

Darbnix pointed the scanner at the woman who was waving her hips seductively in his direction, swirling in elaborately sexy twirls and batting her eyes at him as if she wanted to undress him with her stare.

I clenched my jaw again as envy threatened to consume me and swallow me whole, right into the center of the floor. My eyes were rooted to the scanner, which to my relief didn't light up. It remained blank, empty looking, with no flashing lights or sounds coming from the device in any way.

My shoulders relaxed and I allowed myself to breathe again. I watched Darbnix's expression change from dull annoyance to relief as he realized the woman was not his match.

I couldn't hear him, but I noticed as his lips formulated the words, "I'm sorry, you aren't a match." He looked smug as I watched a subtle smile curl at the edges of his lips.

The woman slinked away, a look of bafflement enhancing her features as if she wasn't expecting that kind of outcome to have happened to her. Darbnix continued to scan several other women, each of whom came up empty, to my smitten joy.

"I'll be right back," I told Slith as I stood up to walk into the party. He blinked up at me with a curious gaze but otherwise didn't move away, remaining in the same position as if he was perfectly happy with observing the crowd from a safe distance.

"You are probably smarter than I am," I mumbled to the watch-lizard as I wandered away.

I wasn't hungry but decided to mingle through the crowd in order to busy myself with something. At the very least, I could place some food on a plate and pretend to be eating. I drifted over to the food tables.

In a last-ditch effort to save my sanity and calm my rattling nerves, I plucked a martini glass filled to the brim with some kind of aquatic-colored beverage inside. I didn't care what kind of drink it was, as long as it contained alcohol that would pacify my screaming mind.

"Having fun yet?" Darbnix walked up behind me and cupped his hand gracefully over my shoulder.

I startled for a moment, yelping as I spun around to give him a saucy grin. "That is not funny." I smirked playfully.

"What are you talking about?" Darbnix gave me an expression of mock-innocence.

"You scared me silly." I giggled and placed my palm on his chest.

There was a moment where an electric current surged through my hand at the touch of his rock-hard chest on my skin. We gazed at each other with passionate longing. I wished I could form the words to tell him to point the scanner at me instead of the other women, but I knew neither one of us would be

courageous enough to get the job done.

“You are the only radiant light in this room,” he finally whispered softly into my ear for only me to hear. The private moment between us made my heart pound.

“Thank you,” I muttered softly as I gave him a pitiful smile.

He gently lifted a loose tendril of my hair off my cheek and delicately tucked it behind my ear. Chill bumps of pleasure prickled on my skin.

“Let’s run away,” I stated. Only part of me was joking. “Let’s get out of here. The crowd is closing in on me and making me hot.”

“You are already hot even without the people in here.” He grinned in a flirtatious way.

I was getting ready to quip something witty back to him as we bantered mischievously back and forth, but I got interrupted as soon as I opened my mouth to speak. I enjoyed being privately naughty with him, discovering the more daring and carefree side of myself that I usually never explored.

Any attempt at broadening my horizons and having fun with my new friend, confidant, and lover all came to a crashing halt in the blink of an eye.

“Hello, Prince Darbnix,” a woman’s voice cooed behind me.

I spun around in shock, and apparently, so did Darbnix as his mouth gaped open in surprise.

“Hello.” He apprehensively shifted his focus and gaze back and forth between me and this gorgeous tall woman standing before us.

“My name is Tia Teller,” she stated confidently in an adorable country accent. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She extended a perfectly manicured hand to Darbnix. He took it reluctantly. “You as well,” he mumbled in a halfhearted way, glancing back at me as if he was afraid to hurt my feelings or offend me by talking to another female other than myself.

“I’m a beauty queen from Little Rock, Arkansas,” she proclaimed with a bubbly, confident smile and a flash of pearly-white, perfectly-straight teeth.

“Uh-huh,” Darbnix managed. I noticed how he swallowed hard.

I glanced at Tia Teller, jealous of her profound beauty. I was trying not to leer, but any attempt I tried to subtly look at her came out as more of a glare than anything else. She had wide blue eyes and seemed charismatic from the moment her eyes locked on ours.

“I’m so happy to be here at this party tonight,” she purred in a sugar-cured Arkansas accent. She looked as if she had been home-grown on the farm but used her charm and good looks to make a name for herself out in the real world.

She wouldn’t stop smiling, which made me cringe. She was so fake that I was certain even a brick wall would see through her bubbly demeanor. She was tall and slender, but curvy in all the right places. Perfect platinum-blonde hair flowed down her back and her skin was golden-toned as if she’d

just spent a week on a private resort island in the Caribbean.

“I think we all know why I’m here,” she said in a breezy tone, tossing her gorgeous blonde locks behind her shoulder.

“Do we?” I blurted out, unable to help myself. The words escaped my lips before my mind had a chance to convince me to keep quiet.

Darbnix glanced at me and gave me a subtle smile through the awkward pain of the moment. His eyes were tormented with a struggle of knowing that the inevitable was just around the bend.

“Well, what are you waiting for, you dreamy hunk?” I froze as Tia placed her delicate, slender fingers on his arm and began grazing her nails gently across his skin.

Darbnix politely pulled away, behaving like a true diplomatic gentleman. “Right.” He nodded mechanically with a sigh, refusing to make eye contact with the perky woman with the round cleavage spilling out of her dazzling and sparkling evening gown.

He turned on the scanner and I held my breath.

As soon as he pointed it in Tia’s direction, it began to vibrate at first, buzzing softly, and then colors began to shimmer and erupt from the sides of the device. As the nightmare unfolded before my eyes, I watched in horror as the scanner began to register at one hundred percent compatibility.

It was as if I was witnessing a crime, a murder or a car wreck. I knew I should look away, but my muscles wouldn’t budge. My eyes were locked in on the scanner pronouncing this vile, blonde sex pistol as the perfect match for Prince Darbnix.

As soon as the device started lighting up, Tia erupted into gleeful shrieks and cheers. She clapped her hands together animatedly and immediately propelled her body into Darbnix, hugging him as phony tears pooled in her ocean-blue eyes.

“Isn’t it amazing, darling?” she wailed with delight and joy into Darbnix’s ear. “We are a match!”

“I . . . guess . . .” Darbnix muttered, staring at the ground as if he was completely baffled. A distressed pang of guilt flashed in his eyes, but he refused to look at me. He seemed hesitant and dubious, as if he didn’t actually believe the results to be accurate.

Tia either wasn’t picking up on his doubtful radar, or she didn’t care. She snaked her arms around his neck and moved him through the crowds, proclaiming herself as the match for all eyes to witness and ears to hear.

“I’m Prince Darbnix’s match!” she exclaimed. “Look at the scanner! He pointed it to me and I am the winner.” She smiled and laughed maniacally. “One hundred percent compatible!” she boasted.

I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to run from the room and burst into tears. She pushed past me. “Oh, honey.” She waved me off dismissively. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Anger boiled in my blood. I clenched my fists, but I couldn’t move a single muscle. Tia paused, staring at me as if I were mentally challenged and hadn’t understood her correctly.

“I’m sorry, dear,” she addressed me again as if I was a first grader. “Darbnix is going to be busy planning our wedding. I think it’s best if you give us some privacy now to celebrate.” Her lips curled into a bragging smile as she continued to crow about being the genetic match to the handsome prince.

I glanced up at Darbnix, who appeared sheepish. The color had drained from his mocha skin. Crushed and humiliated, I ran from the room as I realized that he wasn’t going to come to my defense. I raced out the doors of the ballroom, gasping for oxygen and trying to capture any ounce of pride I had left in my body.

CHAPTER 11

DARBNIX

I saw Rose scurrying from the room out of my peripheral vision, but I was frozen in place. My feet were locked to the floor, rooted by shock and surprise. I had not been expecting the events of the last several minutes to play out like they had. Not at all. It was as if an electric bolt of sheer terror had briefly paralyzed me. I wanted to call out to Rose, to run to her side, but nothing happened. My muscles were suspended.

My mouth gaped open. I was stunned silent for a few brief seconds, unable to think or speak.

"Darbnix, get your act together." My youngest brother, Rawklix, came to my aid as he whispered in my ear, coaxing me to do something, anything . . . to just *react*.

He looked embarrassed for both of us. After all, this *was* our gala. We were there for the sole purpose of finding a match to be read by our scanners. I had simply been doing my job and due diligence for the sake of my native home planet.

"Huh?" It was the only word I could muster. I was dumbfounded as I deliriously gazed around the ballroom full of partygoers who were staring at me as if I had lost my mind, waiting expectantly for me to do something. They were waiting for a performance they wouldn't receive.

I shook my head, as if either the contents would leak out of my mind like dirt from a dust pan or the action might erase the events that had unfolded.

My scanner had lit up for this loud-mouthed, big-chested woman who was spilling out of her top so wildly that part of me was compelled to drape a scarf over her shoulders in order to modestly cover her up to a more dignified and ladylike exposure.

She was chattering like a maniac, flipping her bleached blonde dramatic waves of hair off her shoulder. she animatedly boasted to anyone and everyone who would listen that the genetic scanner had registered *her* as a match.

Yes, *her*, the country bumpkin turned self-proclaimed model superstar. I wondered whether an ounce of her body from head to toe was real, including her demeanor. She looked like a plastic Barbie. Nothing about her was natural. She was a phony, inside and out. I didn't even know her yet, and I had already intuitively discovered that much.

My jaw locked, and I fumbled to keep a steady grip on the scanner, which to my dismay was still

sending strobes of light through the room. In my toxic state of mind, I was so absorbed in my shock that I hadn't even realized that I'd never stopped pointing it at her.

I quickly shot my arm down like a cannon, flipping the device off in one jerky and hasty movement. I didn't even know what to say. I glanced at my brothers for some kind of resolution or advice, but they were just glancing at me as if I were a circus animal to observe.

I wished I could fling the damn scanner across the room and shatter it into a million pieces. Surely, it had to be broken somehow. Surely, this wasn't my fate. The universe would not be that vicious and cruel to me.

I also hated to sound like a sullen and spoiled child who didn't get his way, so for a few brief moments, I kept my mouth shut. I didn't know what to say anyway. As soon as I opened my mouth, it would seem so raw and real, so . . . final. I didn't want to officially proclaim this woman as my bride-to-be.

I swallowed hard, taking another glance around the room, mentally preparing myself to say . . . what, exactly? I had no clue.

How to begin. My throat was dry and felt hollow, like it was swelling beyond its natural size. I was discombobulated in my head. My lips and tongue were like gritty sandpaper. Everyone was still searching my eyes with expectant expressions. If not for Tia continuing to buzz with gloating about being my genetic match, it would be a highly awkward scenario.

My blood was boiling. How could this atrocious, flashy woman be my match? The scientists who'd provided the devices in the first place had never offered us any guarantee of having chemistry on a deeper level. In fact, some of them were so severely blunt about the bleak options to stoop as far as saying we might end up despising our matches.

But, alas, a match was a match. The biological readings were claimed by our team of intelligent scientists to be accurate and almost one hundred percent failsafe unless tampered with. What were the chances of someone else breaching the system and taking my device into their control? The concept was remote at best.

There was nothing I could do about the situation or the current outcome. I didn't have the capability to rewind the clock and erase the events of the night. I would have to do my best to exercise resiliency, putting one foot in front of the other. My survival instinct kicked into overdrive.

I glared at my brother Gardax. I was fuming, livid. If not for him, I would still be able to enjoy my time courting the delightful Rose, a person I actually did have things in common with. I clenched my teeth. He'd gnawed at my psyche, convinced that the only option for breeding was contained within this huge hunk of plastic with an intelligence scanner.

Tia was still extravagantly spewing her delight from beside me, ranting and raving about how fate had shifted against all odds in her favor. It was nauseating.

"Can you believe it?" she squealed with excitement. "I'm going to be the *bride* of the *prince*." She held her palm to her chest and feigned humility, even going as far as to muster up a rosy flush to her cheeks.

My patience was a thin line, stretching to the limit. Soon, I was going to erupt like a volcano, spewing the hot lava contents of my frustrated emotions out into the eyewitnesses of the party. I had to bite my tongue and restrain as much as possible before I turned this into a media field day, sprouting with negativity for me and my brothers. I had to look at the big picture here. I had to be calm and rational if I wanted to get through this nightmare.

Slith, on the other hand, was less mindful of his composure and perseverance for withstanding Tia's annoyingly shrill and boastful voice. By this time in the chaos and debacle, he had wandered over to stand by my side, taking a less-subtle approach to his disapproval of the gloating platinum blonde.

"Easy, boy," I hissed under my breath and began stroking the top of his head in order to pacify him.

Slith wasn't lulled by my attempts to comfort him. His purple, scaly skin was shimmering with bitter contempt as he continued to glare at the unsuspecting Tia Teller. The annoying woman was locked in her own little delusional world where she was the queen of the universe. I didn't know anything about her other than the fact that she seemed extremely obnoxious and prided herself on being as arrogant about the situation as possible.

"Take that thing out of here," my brother Lortnam murmured in my ear. "The damn beast is a distraction and it's scaring everyone."

I glared at Daren. "He is just being protective. He obviously isn't a fan of this woman." I nudged my chin subtly in Tia's direction.

Daren rolled his eyes and gave me a sympathetic look. "My dear boy, I don't think there is anything in the world you can do about it now."

I clenched my teeth. There had to be some mistake. I walked up to Gardax. "I *told* you these stupid scanners were unreliable. They can't be trusted."

Gardax raised his eyebrows. "What are you talking about?" He pointed to the scanner. "It seemed like it worked to me a few minutes ago. Turn it back on to recheck."

"No!" I snarled. I am *not* going to give her even more of an excuse to gloat and taunt everyone in this room with her obvious motives to get my wealth, power, and status."

I was borderline frantic. My cheeks were flushed and my skin felt clammy and sweaty. My stomach rolled with waves of trepidation. I suspected something was amiss here. I was drowning in a sea of turmoil, but as I reached up for a lifeline, no one would extend me one, not even my own brothers.

"Help me *do* something about her," I fired back defensively when it was clear to me that I wasn't going to get the rescue I so desperately needed.

Rose had fled the scene a while ago, humiliated and hurting, I was certain. I needed to do an exceptional amount of damage control, but first, I had to eliminate the current problem, or at least attempt to sort out this wild and far-fetched scenario.

Slith was still snarling at Tia, barring his teeth in her direction. The sound of his aggressive growls captured her attention. She spun around like a top, staring down at my beloved watch-lizard with a horrified expression.

“What in the world is . . .” she trailed off with a repulsed pause and then pointed a perfectly manicured French-tipped finger at Slith. “This thing?” She completed the sentence, spitting out the word as if she were utterly disgusted by Slith’s presence.

“This is my pet watch-lizard,” I explained as patiently as I could muster. “His name is Slith, and he’s very loyal once you get to know him.”

Tia didn’t bother to allow me to finish my speech on selling Slith’s personality. She interrupted me in a hasty instant.

“Eww,” she whined. “He shouldn’t be here. There are *people* here,” she proclaimed as if I had some nerve, allowing an animal to enter such grandiose ball.

“She’s right—” Gardax began.

“Shut up!” I roared, holding up my palm to silence him. “Everyone just . . . please, shut up.” I took a deep breath, but I realized I was panting with anxiety over the situation.

Tia stared at me as if I had slapped her in the face. She began to scowl, and dark features shadowed her otherwise blue eyes. She placed a taunting hand on her hip and pouted out her lip as if she owned the place and it was high time everyone knew their role in her world.

“I want that beast turned into luggage as soon as we are married,” she exclaimed.

“No!” I snapped. “You will do no such thing.”

“Excuse me?” She scoffed, placing her palm to her chest. “How dare you speak to me like that,” she drawled in a feigned offended farm-girl voice.

“I am the prince of Noor from the planet Trilynia,” I proclaimed in a firm voice. “I can do exactly as I want. *You* are not the princess yet. You have no right to speak to *me* like this,” I stated in a booming voice, instantly reversing the roles.

Tia opened her red cherry lips, but no words, or sound, for that matter, escaped. She clamped her mouth shut again and her cheeks flushed in intense and fresh anger. Her blue eyes flashed with fury.

She looked like a spoiled child who was gearing up to have an intense meltdown or tantrum. I didn’t have the patience or the time to deal with a stranger throwing a fit in front of me. I needed to find Rose, to set things right with her once and for all. I could explain everything once I saw her gray eyes and felt that intense flame of attraction at the curl of her smile in my direction.

Even though I was as confused and baffled as she probably was at the moment, I could at least attempt to work through this drama with her by my side. I was fully prepared to argue the scanner’s results. I wouldn’t take this lying down.

“Why should *you* get to marry the woman *you* love?” I hissed with frustration aimed at Gardax. It was his stupid idea to hold this gathering tonight in the first place. He was my intended target because in my rage, I couldn’t reason with anything other than the practicality that he *must* be to blame as the source of my terrible night that had just been one nightmare after the next.

“Amy was my match! My scanner had been tampered with,” he argued.

I shifted my weight and licked my lips, pointing to my chest. “What’s to stop those wretched engineers from doing the same thing to my scanner?” I protested. I already was wary about the results, especially after the suspicions explored by Davon.

“I don’t know.” For the first time since the match had been discovered by the scanner, Gardax finally looked puzzled and slightly apprehensive about the remote possibility that I could be onto something here.

“Excuse me?” Tia interrupted the private conversation I was attempting to have with my brother in front of hundreds of people.

Gardax and I spun around to gawk at her. She was still standing in that same position with an entitled hand on her hip. “Is there something you want to discuss with your future bride? If so, you can tell all of us.”

I was spinning out of control with exasperation. “I hardly think that’s necessary,” I said, becoming more perturbed by the second.

“Are you going to apologize for your remarks?” Tia demanded. “This is hardly the way I want to start a marriage.”

“First of all,” I declared, taking a step in her direction as I pointed an accusatory finger at her. “This is not a marriage.” I gestured back and forth between us. “Second of all, I have nothing to apologize for. You are the one who started the argument by saying you would turn my pet into luggage.”

“Calm down.” My brother Lortnam cupped a hand on my shoulder. “You are sinking.”

I didn’t care anymore. It baffled me how anyone other than myself could see this woman as anything other than completely vile. I didn’t want her as my bride. I didn’t even want to *know* her at all. I wished I could just close my eyes and erase the entire night from my memory. To say I was dubious about the scanner results was completely accurate.

By now, a substantially larger crowd had gathered around us, wanting to witness firsthand the bitter feud that was unwrapping before their very eyes between the foreign prince and the sexy blonde from a modest upbringing who had made her way up the popularity rungs by some crazy twist of fate.

I pushed her to the back of my mind as I noticed that Slith was continuing to bare his sharp white teeth in a mouth that was as wide as an alligator’s. His animosity directed at Tia was no mistake. He had a keen sense of reading the bad seeds, and he was hitting the mark off the charts on this blonde bimbo standing in front of us.

She had resorted to huffing and whining in front of the cameras that were clicking and flashing in a public scandal frenzy around us. I couldn’t even think. My head was swimming with scenarios of what Rose might be doing, where she might have escaped to in her humiliation.

I yearned to cuddle her, to whisper in her ear and promise her that everything would be okay in the end, that I could somehow fix this. I longed to be her knight in shining armor. I didn’t want to live a life that didn’t center around Rose. I vowed to prove that to her, if I could ever find her.

“Get out of my way,” I grumbled as I aggressively pushed a pixie, elvish-looking girl out of the way.

She had her camera aimed at me as if it was a gun that she had become trigger happy with.

“Where are you going?” Tia wailed behind me, waving her arms around in the air frantically.

She was playing her victim card. I had to hand it to her. The woman could act and kick up quite a monstrous scene that painted her as innocent while pushing me into the guilty limelight. I would just have to deal with her nasty behavior later. For now, I had a job to do. My ultimate goal was to find Rose and set things right with her.

Tia could kick up an elaborate scene for all I cared. I wouldn’t be there to witness it anymore. I’m sure my brothers wouldn’t be able to wait to throw it in my face and give me all the gory details.

Tia was the type of woman who would milk the attention for all it was worth so that people would empathize with her and take her side.

I didn’t answer her as she continued to scream behind me, demanding answers for where I was going. It was none of her damn business. I trudged out of the room. As soon as I ventured outside, I gasped for air. I had survived the ordeal, but only barely. Now it was time to continue my mission to find Rose.

I ran as fast and hard as I could, away from the people who were fixated on destroying me and obliterating my happiness. I would get to the bottom of this puzzle. Some key factor was missing here, and I was going to unearth the mystery. I would use Davon as my eyes and ears to infiltrate the system and those who’d dared to wrong me.

As I ran through the chilly night, my thoughts wandered back to Rose, the sweet and endearing Rose who stole my heart and deserved my love more than anyone else on this spinning planet.

I hoped the cries of my heart would reach her and that somehow, she would hear my desperation. I hoped even more that she would be willing to listen.

CHAPTER 12

ROSE

By the time I pushed the front door open upon returning to my home, my lungs were burning. My throat was sore, and I was choking back sobs until I could finally reach the privacy and seclusion of being in my own house. I didn't want to expel the violent tears that threatened to ravage through me until I knew I was behind closed doors and no one could witness my breakdown. I had run the entire way, never slowing my stride even for a second.

My dogs, Amber and Jasmine ,welcomed me home with enthusiastic wags of their tails and joyous smiles. Their tongues stuck out as they panted with excitement. I patted their heads and allowed a few tears to escape and spill over my cheeks.

"Hi, girls," I squeaked, crouching down on bended knee to be on their visual and physical level. I gave them both maternal and loving squeezes, pressing my cheeks to the soft tufts of fur on their bodies. "I love you both so much," I sobbed, finally caving in to my sorrow and grief from the events that had unfolded back at the party.

I collapsed on the couch, too mentally and physically exhausted to move another muscle, at least for a few minutes. My dogs sagged their heads on my lap, resting beside me while they stared up at me with curious, droopy eyes and somber expressions.

"It's okay, really." I sniffed, unable to muster a smile for them.

I tucked my legs under myself and grabbed a throw blanket from edge of the couch, draping it over myself and my dogs. I was fully prepared to stuff myself silly with ice cream, binge-eating my feelings until I felt oddly gross and comforted at the same time.

I would just sit here and cuddle my dogs until I had no choice but to move, either to the bathroom or to work. Perhaps I'd even do something wild and crazy like call in sick. I wanted to stay in my sweat pants and try to forget the nightmare of the scanner registering another woman as Darbnix's match.

It wasn't going to be an effortless or painless task. The challenge would undoubtedly take its toll on me, but I was normally resilient and floated through life with a tenacious attitude.

I would have no choice but to pick myself back up, dust the dirt off my knees, and press forward. Life would eventually go on. Would I find true love elsewhere? Maybe. It was possible, but I didn't have a crystal ball to view my future.

My eyes wilted, and my shoulders shook with silent, heavy sobs. My eyes were swollen and raw. I brushed the tears off my cheeks and inhaled a deep breath. I was better than caving to this debilitating sadness.

The biggest setback? Every time I squeezed my eyes shut, I saw the intensely erotic and handsome stare of Darbnix blazing through me. His hands were grazing across my skin. I sighed into his chest, drawing in a deep breath of his masculinity and safety.

It was as if I had been able to absorb and experience a sliver of my most pleasurable fantasies, but then they were ripped right from my grasp before I could chase them into reality. The rug had been pulled out from under me and my dreams. I began tailspinning right from the clouds I'd been dancing through, plummeting back down to the ground with an unceremonious thud.

Back in the earth-shattering present, and after I'd cried all the tears in my body, I leaned back against the soft, plush couch cushions. My head was throbbing, and I felt like a wilting flower that hadn't received any sunlight or water in days.

"I need a distraction," I croaked to Amber and Jasmine, who responded by hesitantly flicking their tails and glancing at me with guarded expressions. "I'm okay, really." I let out a pitiful laugh. "I promise."

I rubbed the tops of their heads and plucked the television remote from the coffee table in front of me. Groaning with pain from the run home, I flicked on the TV and casually turned on the local news. I wasn't even thinking. I was just flipping channels and landed there. I stared at the screen with a blank, vacant expression and a mind void of anything left to offer, at least for tonight.

The news anchors sat in stiff, pleated suits behind their desks. They were droning on about the events of the day, merely reading the words from a teleprompter camera in front of their eyes. I yawned and stretched, debating whether to stand up and wander to the kitchen to shuffle through the freezer for that sappy, self-inflicted pity ice cream I was still pining after. The mood and setting were perfect.

That's when something caught my attention on the screen, a story that I recognized. With shaking hands, I reached for the remote again and hastily pushed the volume button to be able to hear the story better.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was Darbnix, looking as handsome as ever, but clearly irate as he was captured on camera, pointing an accusatory finger at Tia. His cheeks were flushed with hostility.

A spectacle of an event had risen around them as onlookers took out their phones and begun to candidly film the fiasco in real-time as it unfolded. Tia looked as beautiful as ever, pouting out her bottom lip and strutting around with a hand on her hip.

She was undoubtedly trying to portray herself as the victim in this case. Naturally, Darbnix seemed like the disapproving ass who was turning the match from the genetic scanner into a public scandal.

The last segment of the news clip showed Darbnix shoving his way through the cameras, shielding his face from the spotlight as he raced from the ballroom event. My breath was suspended in my lungs. I was frozen, unsure of how to react or what to do next.

I stood up and began to fretfully pace the room. It was one of those nervous habits I did whenever I was anxious about something. I unwound the braid from my hair and began running my hands through my red locks.

I glanced at the clock. It was a little after eleven thirty now. My dogs began whining and their ears were perched on top of their heads. They gave me curiously ominous stares as if they didn't know what to expect but knew that something was rattling their mama.

"It's okay," I hushed them with a soothing voice. "Everything is going to be all right."

Darbnix had fled from his newly-discovered bride. He had fled the scene, barreling his way past the horde of people who had circled around him like iron filings to a magnet. If he was so daring to run away from his responsibilities to his native continent of Noor, then that could only mean one thing.

My heart pounded, and I experienced an erotically charged heat that swelled and surged through my entire body.

He must be on his way to find me. Where else would he be scurrying to?

Would he come to my home? Or my office? I didn't have the answers, but my mind was racing with the scenarios of him rushing through the door and wrapping his arms around me, professing his undying love for me.

I scowled and walked to my fridge, retrieving a bottle of water from the door. That kind of mindset was unhealthy. Fairy tales weren't real, and even if they *were,* they didn't happen to me. I didn't have the luxury of luck on my side, and after tonight, that concept was clearly founded.

I took a deep breath and walked back to my front windows. I didn't know why I was subjecting myself to this kind of torture.

Did I really expect Darbnix to run up to my front porch? That kind of setting was only for the movies, not real life. He could be anywhere by now. Perhaps he even hopped on his floating palace ship and was already on his journey back home.

I walked to the bathroom. I twisted the sink nozzle on full blast, cold water. I leaned over the counter and splashed the cold water all over my face. I needed a freezing dose of reality.

I didn't even go as far as to pat my face dry. I just stared at my reflection in the mirror, ghostly white, with nervous and excited energy swirling around me. I was enchanted by the drips of water that dribbled down my temples and chin.

My body was as still as a statue as my dogs continued to nervously pace in a circle and whine in the hallway outside the bathroom. I knew they were probably hungry. I flicked the light off and trudged my way back to the kitchen to prepare their food.

"Come on," I said in a robotic voice as I patted my leg, coaxing them to follow me. "Are you hungry?"

Maybe if I mechanically and numbly went through the motions of my daily routine, sooner or later, the pain in my heart would stop piercing me like a knife. No matter how you laid the cards on the table,

Tia Teller was the winner. By law, she would get to keep Darbnix all to herself. They would end up making beautiful babies together and living happily ever after.

End of story.

Except my heart and my mind refused to give up. That's why when I first heard the pounding of fists on my front door, I didn't believe that it was real. I was hearing things. I had to be. Who would be fervently knocking on my door at this hour?

My heart wanted to believe that it was Darbnix, but my mind was playing tricks on me, leading me to assume that I was just hearing things. Curiosity pursued me and won. I reluctantly walked to the front door where the knocking became more demanding, louder.

I peered out the window again because I didn't want to swing open the door and fall into some kind of trap or anything even more threatening. My heart exploded when I realized it was Darbnix standing there.

He was real. I pinched my arm to make certain of it. He was standing there, glancing over his shoulder through the darkness as if he were paranoid of being caught or chased.

My body moved in slow motion, but I was probably in reality moving like a flash to the front door. I swung it open and panted, staring at Darbnix. I couldn't speak, I couldn't utter a single word. I just gawked at him as if he were an oasis and I was parched and dying of thirst in the desert.

"Rose . . ." He trailed off, his voice apologetic and frenzied. "If you will just allow me inside to explain." He stumbled, apparently at a loss of ability for formulating a well-structured sentence.

I nodded abstractly, moving my body to the side to allow him into my living room.

He breezed past me and began pacing around, rubbing his temples.

"All a mistake . . ." he mumbled. "Not right . . ."

Was he talking directly to me or just processing thoughts out loud?

"She isn't . . . monster . . . Slith hated her."

"Darbnix," I interjected.

He stopped cold in his tracks and gave me a guilt-stricken glance through eyes revealing enormous sadness.

"Rose?" He stared at me dumbfounded, as if he hadn't been consciously aware of his actions. It was like driving on a road trip, where you faze out for a while until you suddenly realize how many miles you'd traveled, forgetting everything along the way.

"I'm here." I cautiously wandered over to him.

His eyes pooled with tears. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." I managed to give him a dismal grin.

He drifted over to me, taking my hands. “I never expected her to be the match,” he lamented.

“Me either,” I squeaked, taking a hard swallow.

He shook his head in denial. “I will not do it.”

I paused, trying to assess exactly what he was professing not to do. I raised an eyebrow and kept my gaze locked on his. “I’m sorry? You won’t do what?”

“I won’t marry her.” He squared his jaw and pursed his lips as if he were tasting something disgusting and vile. “I won’t do it.”

“You won’t?” I let out a sigh of relief mixed with a baffled laugh. My emotions were scrambled.

“No.” His gaze was steely and somber.

I shook my head in confusion, trying to make heads or tails of the situation and exactly what Darbnix was trying to elaborate.

“You won’t marry her? But she is your genetic match . . .” I trailed off, suddenly not understanding why I was coming to Tia Teller’s defense, of all things.

A shadow cast over Darbnix’s noble and stoic features. “I will not marry her,” he continued to declare, each time in a firmer tone than the last.

“Okay.” I gulped and waited for him to elaborate. “If you think that is best.” What did I know? Ultimately, it was out of my realm to persuade him in either direction.

He scowled, although it wasn’t aimed directly at me but just at how unfair life was proving to be at the time.

“I would rather give up my throne than be married to some gold-digging bitch who doesn’t care about me, who only wants me for my power, status, and money.” He plopped down on the couch and placed his head in his hands, defeat sagging his shoulders.

“It’s going to be okay.” I approached him, respecting his noble declaration to be willing to give up everything just so he didn’t have to marry someone he didn’t love.

He glanced up at me with a pitiful gaze. “I will not stand idly by and allow that machine, that hunk of plastic, to dictate the rest of my future. If I have to give up my throne and everything I have ever known, then so be it.”

His eyes were like unturned stones. He didn’t flinch or move a single muscle in his entire body. There was nothing to lead me to believe he was being one hundred percent candid with me.

I began to stroke and rub his back, grazing my fingertips over his skin in an effort to console and distract him.

“It will be all right,” I whispered in a soothing tone. “We will figure it out.”

When Darbnix glanced up at me, his expression was pained. “Being here with you is the light that shines through the darkness.”

I blushed at the earnestness of his compliment. “Thank you,” I whispered, humbled.

He leaned in to kiss me. I held my breath and waited for his lips to press into mine. Then, just like all the other times before, lightning bolts of pleasure were triggered in my soul and started catapulting to the surface of my mind.

“You are everything I ever wanted,” he confessed, groaning into my ear while he planted a soft showering of kisses upon my neck.

I giggled under the tickling touch of his stubble, hugging him tightly to my body. I wanted him to stay pressed against me forever. “I wish we could be together,” I admitted in a grave tone, but I didn’t deny him his current passion, allowing him to run his hands all over me. I loved it when we explored each other’s body. It made me feel so sensual.

“Who is going to stop us?” He huffed in a rebellious tone. “I will give up everything in order to solidify my belief that a machine shouldn’t have any persuading role in deciding whom I marry.”

I understood the conflict wreaking havoc in Darbnix’s mind. He was torn between his obligation as the prince of Noor and the impulsive longings of his heart.

His hands were under my shirt, shaking as he slid my bra off my breasts. “I want to see you,” he whispered in a pleading voice. “All of you.”

His eyes were desperate, further enforcing his burning need to ravage me. I planted myself on his lap, straddling him as he lifted my shirt over my head. I pressed myself to him, feeling the pulse of his erection throbbing between my legs.

I fumbled with the belt to his pants and helped him shimmy them down to his ankles, where he flung them across the room. My heart raced with desire. He began running his hands through my hair, groaning as he continued to stare at me with a lust-glazed expression.

“You don’t even know how beautiful you are,” he crooned into my ear.

He was right. I was no comparison to Tia Teller, with her golden blonde hair and bronzed skin, to her bouncy, perky breasts spilling out of her expensive dress. I would never be able to stand a chance against her, yet to my baffling surprise, here was Darbnix. He had chosen me against all odds.

I assumed it had something to do with his humble roots. Darbnix wasn’t interested in anything that was flashy or entertaining on a more obvious level. He would much prefer to stroll the rolling hills of his farmland, and he also loved animals.

We had far more in common than he had with Tia. It was such a terrible shame that genetic matching had nothing to do with measuring chemistry.

I stared at his dark, thick flesh between his legs. His girth was shocking. I spread my legs, still sitting on top of him as he grabbed the tip of himself and pushed it into my swollen and sensitive pink flesh.

I gasped as he plunged inside. The impact hit me with a surge of a million volts of erotic desire. I moaned, gripping his back. He grabbed my hips and began to bounce me up and down on top of him.

We were so desperate for each other that we didn’t even bother to go to the bedroom. I could see it in

Darbnix's eyes. He was blazing for me in the same way that I yearned for him.

His thrusts were full of hysteria and wild, raw ambition. He cupped my bouncing breasts in his hands, plucking a nipple into his mouth with a groan of pleasure.

I squeezed my bare thighs around his waist, snaking my legs around him to dig my heels into his skin. In a frenzy of lust, I came with enough power to light up the city. I was still on top of him while he continued to bury himself inside me, ready for the erupting finish line of ecstasy.

I was trembling and shaking in the aftermath of my beautiful orgasm. He gently tugged on my hair, giving one last sensual grunt as he filled me. He collapsed into a heap after emptying himself.

He slid out of me with delicate grace. The stress of the night and the burdens of our futures were no more. For that moment, even if we never achieved it again, we had each other. It was us against the cruel world, and nothing could take away the haze of our sexual bliss. Holding hands, we drifted off to sleep right there on the couch, two naked bodies intertwined. Our connection was deeper than any biological scanner could ever detect.

CHAPTER 13

DARBNIX

"Are you going to answer that call or just keep ignoring it?" Rose's eyes were sympathetic as she gently questioned me.

I grumbled and shoved the phone back into my pocket. "Ignore it," I opted.

Rose exhaled a sigh of perfect patience. She placed her slender hand on my back and began to stroke my skin underneath my shirt. "You *need* to talk to them."

I couldn't be mad at her, even for being persistent. As soon as I glanced up at her and we locked eyes, I knew she was right.

"They are just going to convince me to go back to that gold-digging bitch," I countered. I refused to call her by her actual *real* name of Tia Teller.

Rose was a saint. "You are going to have to face it, you know. She is your match." Her voice was a silent whisper at the end, a bitter pill for even someone as diplomatic as her to have to swallow.

I gently grazed her rosy cheek with my lips. "I'm so sorry that you are having to face this problem."

Rose cradled her hands in her lap and glanced down at her lap with a chuckle. "I know . . ." It was as if she didn't know how to respond, or something was holding her back.

"Go on." I tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "Tell me what you want to say." My voice was coaxing and gentle.

She looked up at me with hesitancy flickering in her eyes, as if she didn't want to hurt my feelings. "It's okay," she croaked as she cupped her tiny white hand over my mocha-colored one. The contrast was beautiful and reflected art in my eyes. "It's your duty to your nation, to your planet, to your people. You are the prince. You have an obligation. You can't fall short of those responsibilities to carry your family name and help your race reproduce."

"Rose—" I interrupted her.

She held a hand up to continue discussing the matter. "I am going to be fine," she promised. "I'm a strong woman. I've been independent my entire life. This is just a minor setback on our plans but—"

Now it was my turn to interrupt her. "It's a *huge* setback."

She shrugged humbly as if there wasn't a solution on Earth to get her out of this mess.

"I don't want to marry that coldhearted and calculating wench," I stated, but this time it sounded more like a plea.

Rose's lips curled with empathy and her cheeks flushed. Her expression was solemn. I met her gaze. "Can't we just make love under the stars forever? Can't we just melt into the sheets and stay naked for the rest of our lives?"

I snaked my arms around her waist and buried my face into her neck, pressing my lips to her soft and tender skin that smelled like fresh linens straight from a sunkissed line in the valley.

She mildly pushed my chest away, giving me a tremulous smile. "You know I would love nothing more than to do that too . . ."

"But?"

"But . . ." She trailed off. "You know that isn't on our list of options here."

I groaned and tilted my head up to the ceiling, wishing there were a way to weasel my way out of this one.

I glanced with wary trepidation at the phone that buzzed again in my pocket. It was my brother, Gardax. The first time, it had been my brother, Manzar. They only wanted to talk to me about one thing, and that was setting things right with my unexpected and highly unfavored bride-to-be, Tia Teller.

I glanced at Rose for one more dose of confidence before I hit the answer button on the phone's screen.

"Hello?" My voice was expectant.

"Why the hell have you avoided our calls?" Gardax fired defensively into the phone, not even skipping a beat.

I crossed my leg over my knee and leaned back in the chair, expelling a sigh. "Well, hello to you too," I chastised.

"This is serious, Darbnix," he retorted.

"What is serious?" I was playing a game with him, but only to bide my time and stall until I could brainstorm a more positive outcome, amicable with my wishes and desires for my future. In Gardax's mind, those types of things held no merit.

Naturally, I had to fight for the things I wanted out of my own life because no one else seemed to care enough about whether these genetic scanners were highly susceptible to infiltration. I still couldn't turn a blind eye to the idea that my scanner could have been compromised by a vicious hacker out there, determined to destroy me.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Gardax slashed in a reprimanding tone. "This is serious, Darbnix. We need to meet to discuss this."

I glanced at Rose with a grin, feeling devious and ready to make my eldest brother the target. “My schedule is pretty full at the moment. I’ll have my assistant call your assistant to arrange a meeting.” I paused for effect and pretended to glance at the watch on my wrist as if I cared at all about the outcome of the meeting. “How about five years from now?”

Gardax’s thunderous voice roared through the phone. Rose jumped in her seat in response, turning stark white.

“We are meeting at your palace in the conference room in half an hour. If you are not there, consider yourself barred as a member of the family. Your titles will be stripped and you will lose your province and the continent of Noor.”

He hung up, leaving the air to hum around me with a buzz of finality. I knew that he was waiting for that information to sink in and hit reality with me. I didn’t meet Rose’s gaze, but I knew that she had heard every threat from my brother.

“It’s okay,” she finally said after what seemed like an eternity of silence between us. “Just go. I will be right here if you need me.” She stroked my neck and burrowed her fingers into my skin, massaging the stiffness right out as if she were born to give me a healing touch.

I rubbed my temples and sighed in defeat. “All right.” I nodded without looking up. “I’ll go to the meeting.”

“Maybe it won’t be that bad?” she suggested in a quizzical tone, but we both knew we were kidding ourselves by expecting anything less than a disastrous outcome.

“It’s kind of you to have a positive spin on everything,” I mentioned as I stood up and pushed the chair back under the kitchen table. I glanced at the front door, feeling like a part of me would die as soon as I stepped foot into the outside world. I didn’t want to be ripped away from the only woman in the world I’d ever cared about.

“I’ll call you later,” I promised, wrapping my arms around her dainty waist. I rested my chin on the soft tufts of hair on her head, drawing in a deep breath of her fresh linen scent just in case I never got to see her again.

I only looked back at her once. I knew that if I witnessed the tears softly falling down her cheeks, I would become too ravaged and torn to leave her side.

“Okay.” I held my hands over my head and did a circle spin. “Here I am. Thirty minutes to the dot, right on time.”

“Let’s just get on with it,” my brother Akrawn droned with annoyance. “We have bigger problems to address rather than bickering with each other,” he spat.

“Just cut to the chase,” I fired back. “Tell me I have to marry that bitch who’s just out for my money and status.”

I was bitter and prepared to feud. I was backed into a corner where choices weren't my own. I understood the power I held in my hands. It was my natural choice to help re-populate the beloved Noor and Trilynia that I loved so fondly, but it came at a price that I wasn't sure I was willing to take.

It was rare for my brothers and I to all be congregated in the same room, but these circumstances proved worthy of the cause. Here we were, all assembled together, angry-faced and secretly feeding our own rivalries against each other.

"You *must* make nice with your new bride-to-be," Lortnam urged.

"Publicly," his twin brother, Jinurak, supplemented.

I leaned back in the swivel chair, glancing down at Earth's rolling pastures and greenspace beneath our feet. Rose had also encouraged me not to run from my problems and face them head-on. I had the reassurance that she would always be there if I needed her.

"We have some serious damage control to do," Rawklix offered. He was the most laidback of all of us, and even he was trying to persuade me into the trap. "None of the other women are going to fawn after us if they assume we might just disappear completely after throwing a huge tantrum at the matchmaking parties." He was swiveling back and forth in the chair, rolling his wrist around animatedly as he explained the predicament.

I squared my jaw and stared at him, saying nothing.

"Everyone is right," Manzar agreed, tearing me away from my hostile thoughts. "We urge you to come out of hiding and repair your reputation."

"How do you insist I do that?" I roared defensively. "No one seems to be paying any attention to me." My frustrations were wobbling out of control.

Lortnam frowned. "What are you talking about?"

I glanced around the room full of my brothers, expectantly keeping their eyes locked on mine, awaiting an explanation.

"I'm referring to the simple fact that before my scanner registered Tia Teller as a match, Davon sent me a letter with intelligence that he suspected there could be a hacker trying to infiltrate our computer systems."

"The scientists behind the devices are working tirelessly, diligently around the clock to assure that won't happen again," Gardax countered.

I stared at him, baffled. "How do you know that they weren't too late?"

"Well, how do you know that you can trust everything that lanky fool says to be the truth?" Rawklix snickered, referring to Davon.

"He's trained on the subject," I retorted flatly. "He is well-versed on how to perform his job."

"That may be true." Manzar held up a hand to halt our back-and-forth bickering. "But it still doesn't solve the current problem that we need to deal with, and that is the huge publicity scandal. We are

under a significant amount of scrutiny and will be until we satiate the media and assure them that we are fully prepared to live up to the expectations of our interplanetary treaty that we are currently under."

I sat back with a sigh. Manzar was right. He'd pounded the nail with the hammer, hit the target spot-on. My head was swimming, but not with scenarios of how to dig myself out of this ultimate hole. "Fine," I grumbled. "I'll make peace with the bitch."

"She has a name, and it's Tia Teller," Gardax advised me. "You will speak to her by her true name while addressing the cameras, or even in private, for that matter, if you can't trust her enough to not spew gossip about everything you say to her."

"Yet I'm supposed to marry her and make children with her." I scowled sardonically, delighted to give my brother an emotional punch.

"Let's just deal with one situation at a time," Lortnam offered.

I stood up. "Meeting adjourned. I'll do what needs to be done."

"By meeting with Tia and attempting to at least pretend to be civil?" Gardax gave me a skeptical raise of his eyebrows as if he didn't trust that I could oblige him with the task.

"THAT MUST BE HER," MY BUTLER PROFESSED AS THE DOORBELL CHIMED THROUGH THE HOUSE, AN alarm that sent my senses bolting around the room in fear of what kind of torture might be filtering its way into my horizon.

I swallowed hard. Tia Teller was undoubtedly on the other side of the door, most probably waiting to get her slender manicured hands on all of my belongings, including myself. The ultimate plan devised by my brothers was for me to have a private meeting of reconciliation with her, then publicly declare our joint agreement to have an arranged marriage via the genetic scanner's match.

It was a concept that I was going to struggle through, if able to make it through the ordeal at all. I hadn't been left with much of a choice in the matter and ultimately needed to conform to compromises in order to keep my family and the future of my race afloat.

"Go ahead," I sighed. "Let her in."

My heart pounded with apprehension as I heard the clackity-clack sound of her stiletto heels pounding with each step she made across the glass floor. She might as well take the shoe off and stab me right through the gut with it.

"Hi, husband to be." She waved dramatically with a devious grin spreading across her cherry-red lips.

Her hair fell in a landscape of platinum blonde down her back. She was wearing a skimpy red dress, leaving little to the imagination.

“Tia.” I shook her hand politely and gave her a curt nod as if I were gearing up for some legislative business instead of an encounter with my soon-to-be wife.

“I am so excited about our impending nuptials!” she exclaimed. “I have elaborate plans. Everything is going to be perfect. Everyone is going to be looking at *me*, the gorgeous bride!” She pointed a self-indulgent finger at her chest.

I subtly cleared my throat, feeling a migraine brewing in my head, and she had only walked through the door and entered the room a mere thirty seconds ago. How was I supposed to endure an entire lifetime with a materialistic woman who repulsed me on such a profound level?

“Yes, well . . .” I began and trailed off, scrutinizing her as she trotted through the room as if she already owned the place. “There is time to mull over all the details.”

She gave me a perverse glance mixed with pure hysteria and shock. “Are you *kidding?”* She drawled in that Kansas home-grown accent. “There is *no* time, Darbnix! We need to get these nuptials moving as quickly as possible.” She tossed her mane of blonde hair behind her shoulder and pouted, as if she was ready to throw a giant tantrum if I disagreed with anything that came out of her mouth.

I must have been giving off a denouncing vibe because she strutted over to me and cloaked her slender, fake-tanned arms around my neck. I cringed as she tried to kiss my lips, pulling away as she moved on to showering unpleasant kisses upon my cheeks.

“That’s enough now.” I chuckled politely even though I was screaming on the inside. “There will be plenty of time for that,” I lied.

Truth be told, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to perform sexually for her. There was no chemistry between us and I found her personality simply repulsive. “But *baby,”* she whined like a spoiled child not getting her way. “I want you.”

I made a croaking, hissing sound, tensing all of my muscles. “Not before the wedding,” I pronounced. All the while, I was privately brainstorming ideas on how to get out of the ceremony before there was a chance to consummate any marriage.

She was already driving me immensely crazy, simpering and fawning all over me. Would she always be this clingy? I couldn’t breathe or stand it. The awkward leers from my palace staff caught the corner of my eye. It wasn’t lost on me that she was a tornado of havoc and she was barreling through my house and my life at one hundred miles an hour.

“It’s time to meet with the press,” I told her. “We are to meet them at the Intergalactic Headquarters in half an hour. If we are to make it there on time, we must go now.”

Tia looked like a disappointed, sex-crazed heathen. “Can’t it wait, baby?” She purred as she rubbed my chest with her fingertips. I grimaced every time she called me by the affectionate pet name when she hadn’t earned the right to address me by that title.

“Come on,” I grumbled, pressing forward to do the meeting with the press whether she was by my side or not.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, WE WALKED UP THE STEPS TO THE INTERGALACTIC HEADQUARTERS, SHAPED LIKE a dome and filled from top to bottom with windows. As we entered the press room, Tia immediately began complaining that it was too cold for her, that she wanted to go back outside.

She seemed paranoid, skittish. This was an unsettled demeanor I hadn't recognized in her yet but wanted to investigate and explore. She rubbed her hands against her bare arms in an effort to keep herself warm.

"Don't you want to offer your jacket to your bride-to-be?" one reporter buzzed from a seat in front of the panel where I would soon be sitting alongside Tia.

"Uh . . ." I trailed off, glancing at the shivering Tia before relenting to stripping off my own jacket for her. "Here." I causally tossed it to her. She fumbled to clutch it, nearly dropping it in the process.

I sat down and cleared my throat. "I am Prince Darbnix of Noor on the planet Trilynia," I declared. "Allow this to serve as my formal invitation for the press meeting to begin."

Taking a deep breath, I braced myself for impact against the sea of hungry media sharks swimming in the water in front of me, just waiting for me to shed a droplet of blood for them to pounce on.

"Prince Darbnix and I are in *love!"* Tia erupted, standing up and holding her hands over her head, pretending to swoon all over me. I was horrified and shocked, unable to do anything other than stare at the train wreck unfolding before me. "Isn't it fabulous?" she cooed.

"Well, let's just wait a minute—"

"He can't wait to be my handsome husband," she continued, interrupting me so that I couldn't get a word in edgewise to undoubtedly protest.

A dark-haired gentleman with wire-rimmed glasses frowned from the front row of the press panel. "Prince Darbnix, can you advise us on how the scanner discovered Ms. Tia Teller to be your genetic match?"

I glanced over at Tia, who was continuing to dish outlandish lies about our fateful matchup and how she couldn't wait to become the princess of Noor.

"My brothers and I held another party for the exclusive purpose of finding any woman our scanners would light up for, exhibiting a match." I cleared my throat again and shifted my weight uncomfortably, keeping my eyes on Tia to make sure she wouldn't do or say something idiotic.

"And I assume that when you turned the scanner on and pointed it at Ms. Teller here"—the reporter pointed at her—"the scanner lit up, thus proving her to be a genetic match?"

"That's right!" Tia stood up again, bragging to the press about how lucky she was to have found her soulmate. "Isn't it incredible? I have to pinch myself when I wake up everyday that I am going to be so rich!"

My blood was boiling. In a fury of desperation, I thundered the partial truth through the room. "It may

be true that my scanner lit up in the presence of Ms. Teller here," I addressed the media crowd, "but I have some questions about the reliability and accuracy of the scanner's ability for displaying a real match."

Tia gasped as if she couldn't believe I could spout such a vile declaration. "He's just shocked," she tried to recover.

But the media blitz and chaos were already ensuing. Everyone in the press began talking at once, pointing their cameras and swinging their video recorders in our direction. The cat was out of the bag, but the relief I felt about the ordeal was lifting off my shoulders. It was time to shed some light on the truth out there. Tia Teller wasn't going to get to become my bride that easily.

CHAPTER 14

ROSE

I watched the frenzy of cameras rush toward Darbnix and Tia. It was an ambush and a spectacle. My body was frozen. I couldn't move a single muscle. It was like watching a car wreck unfold, witnessing the fire, the flame, and the sheer horror, but being physically unable to move a finger to help. All I could do was watch in awe.

My mouth was gaping open. My dogs were whimpering by my side, curious yet slightly apprehensive to react. I was finally able to gain control of my neck muscles. I craned it down to look at them.

"I don't know . . ." I trailed off in a confused whisper, not even able to pacify my own animals, let alone myself.

I had no idea what was going to happen next, not after Darbnix had publicly voiced his doubts about the genetic scanners. Not after he had made a claim that would lead not only himself but the rest of society to doubt the intelligence and reliability of the scanners.

Part of my mind wanted me to celebrate, to be elated by the news. I should be ready to jump over the moon at this point, but I wasn't. I was still skeptical, too fearful of getting hurt again to let my guard down.

I knew that Darbnix was torn, wedged and stuck between two worlds where his heart led him one way and his responsibilities as a prince and a ruler of a continent took him in another direction.

I watched the screen, narrowing my eyes to get a better view. What was happening? I couldn't even detect Darbnix anymore. It was like trying to find the famously adorable Waldo character in a book, only this time, it was a gorgeous alien prince who had stolen my heart, and apparently, the curiosity of the gossip-hungry reporters.

Then, as if a miraculous omen were casting a net to me, I saw Darbnix on the bottom right side of the screen. His fists were balled angrily and his jaw was clenched in fury. His eyes were blazing with frustration as he attempted to escape the flash mob of reporters.

Tia Teller was trailing on his heels, scurrying past the frenzy of the crowd in an effort to keep up with Darbnix.

She was swinging her purse around, trying to swat it at those who dared to get too close to her or those who looked like a threat. Even though she wasn't my favorite person on the planet, my mind

allowed a sliver of a smile to escape my lips. I had to hand it to the girl. The fact that she hadn't already been trampled to death was a miracle in itself.

Her efforts were in vain. Darbnix was far taller than she was and was more difficult to catch. He was agile and athletic, breezing through the frenzy in a flash. Farther and farther he slipped away, using the crowd in his favor to deter her. He switched positions more than once, pushing his way through the warm bodies until he came out the other side.

From there, he was gone.

"Darbnix!" I involuntarily shouted as I plunged to the tv screen, placing my flattened palms against the surface. "Darbnix . . ." I trailed off again in a desperate croak.

Tears pooled in my eyes and ran in salty droplets down my cheeks. I didn't even realize how absorbed I was in my relationship with him until I became aware that all my hopes and dreams might come crumbling down around me in a heap of pain, emotional wreckage, and sorrow for what would never be.

I let my shoulders sag. I wilted like a flower that hadn't received enough sunlight or water. I shuffled back to my couch, plopping down. Where was he going? Would Tia be following? Surely, he wouldn't be able to escape her demands and cries for attention that easily.

I couldn't sit still. I jolted back up to a standing position as if a lightning bolt had just snapped me back to reality. I instinctively glanced out the window, slowly pulling the curtains back to determine whether I would find anything or anyone waiting for me out there in the secluded darkness.

I held my breath and waited.

I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but something in my mind spoke to me, this tiny voice whispering. A force held me in position. I couldn't tear my eyes away from my front porch or my driveway. Sooner or later, the answer would reveal itself right outside.

All I had to do was enact the deepest, purest patience I had within my body. Again, it was a challenge easier said than done.

After a while, my eyelids became heavy. My mouth drooped in fatigue and I cradled my head in my chin, propping my elbow up on my knee to prevent myself from falling into a heap of despair right onto the carpet.

My eyes were stinging. There was nothing to see outside other than the blanket of darkness. I closed my eyes, allowing myself to relax for a little while. I wouldn't move from the door, at least not yet.

I WAS IN A STATE OF DELIRIUM. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT WAS OR HOW LONG I HAD SUCCUMBED TO a fitful slumber right beside my front door. I was still sitting by the window. The curtains were still pulled partially open to reveal a view of my front lawn.

I observed that it was still night time, so I couldn't have drifted off to sleep for more than an hour or

two. I wiped the groggy feeling of sleep from my eyes, yawned, and stretched. I tugged at the back of my braid, trailing the tip of my fingers across the woven surface of my silky red hair.

I blinked, gazing out the window again. This time, I saw something out there. I had to squeeze my eyes shut and then open them again to make sure I wasn't seeing things that might have been a figment of my imagination.

It was a figure, an enormous figure beelining to my front door. My heart pounded in my chest. My palms were clammy. The figure appeared to be alone. When it got closer, I knew it was a man. A powerful leader, a prince. *My* prince.

Darbnix had come back for me.

In what seemed like slow motion, I swung the door open and stood in the middle of the door way, panting hard with my arms out to my sides. Darbnix was alone, running toward my house as if his whole life depended on it.

As soon as he had barreled through the door with a crash, I slammed it shut and locked the deadbolt behind us.

"What on earth happened?" I exclaimed.

Darbnix spun around, quickly regaining his composure. His eyes were wild, blazing with some kind of resilient force.

"I had to come back for you." He was breathing hard. "I told them I needed a pardon."

"What?" I shook my head. The entire idea sounded outlandish.

Darbnix swatted his hands through the air dramatically as if he were trying to capture an invisible fly. "I asked the Intergalactic Treaty and Alliance Committee if I could have a brief reprieve to get my wits about me. I explained that I needed some time to collect my emotions and personally discover my future on my own."

I was stunned. I stared at him, shaking my head in disbelief. "They allowed you to do that?"

Darbnix shrugged, calming down little by little. "I didn't give them much choice. I ran away before they got a chance to answer or even tell me no."

"Where is Tia?" I glanced suspiciously at the door as if I expected her to barge in and start demanding answers in the next minute or two.

"I don't know." Darbnix cackled, a manic sound escaping his throat. He approached me with a glimmer of hope, freedom, and love twinkling in his eye. "I do know that I don't want to marry Tia. I want to be with you. It's modest for now, but for now, it's all I have."

I didn't need answers from Darbnix. I needed him to swallow me into his enormous, protective arms and vow to never let me go. I didn't care if the laws or the regulations prevented us from being together. If we had time to escape, to get away, that's what I wanted to do with him.

I snaked my arms around his neck, reeling him in. I needed to smell his masculine scent, to feel the

galloping of his heartbeat pounding against my chest, in unison with my heartbeat. His embrace was blissful and peaceful. I wished that I could always stay in this moment with him. I wanted to stay in this safety zone where no one could try to tear us apart.

Darbnix leaned down and planted the most affectionate yet desperate kiss I had ever received on my lips. I sighed with contentment, fully prepared to sink into his arms while the world melted away.

I knew that it was a fanatical concoction that my imagination had just dreamed up. Reality was sinking in too quickly for me to stay absorbed in my daydreams. We had a crisis here to deal with, and I was prepared to stick by Darbnix's side and be the solid rock and foundation for him to lean against in a stressful time of turmoil.

He pulled away, searching my eyes for meaning or answers that had yet to come.

"It's okay," I blurted out. "We will get through this, together."

I cupped my hand over his massive one.

He gave me an earnest smile, drawing me in for a hug. We remained with our bodies pressed against each other for several seconds before either one of us had the bravery to pull apart. Releasing wasn't an option now.

"I believe you," I told him. "I believe you about the device. The scanner." I swallowed hard, waiting for his reaction.

His face beamed with recognizable relief. A subtle smile even cracked his lips ever so slightly. He grazed his thumb across my cheek, giving me a tremble of pleasure and a flush of desire.

"You do? You believe me?" There was so much spirit in the sound of his voice.

"I do," I affirmed with a resilient nod of determination swelling in my belly. "Very much," I added.

Darbnix squeezed me so tightly that for a brief second, I couldn't breathe. It was a hug that was laced with passion and mirrored the same resolve I harbored inside myself.

He stared at me with perseverance. His voice was somber and grave when he spoke again. "I have deep concerns over being forced to marry anyone who isn't you, Rose."

My heart pounded. My cheeks flushed with the heat of his compliment, and all the emotions of love came gushing out of me. "I don't want to marry anyone besides you either," I admitted.

I didn't care about being pampered with luxuries or delicacies. I just wanted Darbnix, and I wanted to stand proudly by his side for all of eternity, even when we turned to ash and dust with the ground at the end of our physical journey, right at the edge, shifting to our spiritual one.

"I would rather give up my throne than wed Tia." I knew that he was serious by the way his expression showed the pain of the realization.

"It won't come to that," I promised, even though I wasn't entirely certain of what the future would bring. I still held appreciation that he was willing to give everything up for me, including his power. I didn't want to think of that actually happening.

“We will do what we can to ensure that won’t be the outcome.” I delicately placed my hand on his cheek, reaching up to touch him. “For right now, so we both don’t go crazy, we will just think of that as being the worst possible scenario.”

Darbnix grinned, trying to put on a stoic and noble face for me. “Thank you for being so kind. I don’t know how I could get through this without you.”

I gave him a smile in response. “Luckily, you won’t have to.”

“I love you, Rose.” He was wearing his heart on his sleeve. He had put his emotions on the table. He had played the last card in the draw.

I couldn’t breathe. His profession of love for me was everything I had been dreaming of, but the reality of hearing it sent me into shock. I started grinning first, then laughing, then tears soaked my eyes and drained down my cheeks.

“I love you too,” I finally exclaimed, feeling the vibrations of the romance surrounding and swelling around us.

Our lips crashed into each other with dangerous, violent passion and hunger. I ran my hands through his hair, tracing his scalp with my fingertips. He clawed at my back with desire, trying to pull my shirt over my head.

He was halfway there when a knock came at the door. It was a frantic knock, one that wouldn’t stand for being ignored. The sound crashed through my senses, jolting me back to reality.

Darbnix and I gave each other an apprehensive gaze.

“Are you expecting anyone?” he asked in a paranoid tone.

“No,” I whispered softly while shaking my head. “Not at this hour.”

Darbnix held up his palm, motioning for me to stay put.

“Wait here,” he directed in a gentle tone. “Don’t reveal yourself.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. I had no idea who would be on the other side of that door, but their knocking was becoming more urgent with each pound of fist against wood.

Darbnix walked to the door and peeked out the peephole. I watched his shoulders relax in relief.

“Who is it?” I asked as curiosity got the better of me.

Who would be coming to my house that he would have a favorable reaction to? It couldn’t have been Tia. Besides, she didn’t know me or where I lived. If anything, it was a long shot that anyone would have been able to find me or Darbnix while I was here at my house.

“It’s only Davon,” Darbnix explained as his tone began to ease up slightly.

He gripped the door handle as if he were preparing to pull it open.

“Wait!” I shouted, holding my hands up to prevent him from doing so. “Who is Davon?”

“He’s our intelligence officer,” Darbnix explained. “He runs security for our networks, cyber devices, and everything having to do with internal and external communications.”

“That sounds like a complicated job,” I admitted.

Darbnix shrugged. “Not for Davon. He’s a complete genius. My brothers and I joke that he’s more of a robot than a person.”

“Oh.” I chuckled, scratching my arm while I shifted my weight. I didn’t know why I suddenly felt uncomfortable.

Darbnix opened the door. A lanky man who was even taller than Darbnix stood there, awkwardly and expectantly waiting for direct orders. He had dark hair, resembling the color of midnight without a moon. He was wearing Trilyn Police Force navy-blue clothing with the Trilyn crest displayed on a patch on the right sleeve of his jacket.

“Good evening, Prince Darbnix.” The man I assumed to be Davon gave his leader a deep bow that embodied respect.

“Davon.” Darbnix nodded diplomatically. “What are you doing here this late at night?”

Davon flicked a skeptical glance in my direction and then focused his gaze back on Darbnix. There was an uncomfortable silence as the two men internally deliberated on what to do about the predicament of me standing there beside them.

“I–I can go into another room if you’d like,” I suggested, stammering over my words at the start. I motioned down my hallway while they privately deliberated in my living room.

Davon seemed relieved at the token of my gesture, but Darbnix didn’t skip a beat. “No.” He shook his head with finality, as if the subject wasn’t even up for debate. “You will stay here, with us. Anything Davon has to discuss with me, you can hear too.”

Davon visibly squirmed as he waited for Darbnix to yield and step aside to grant him access into the house. The decision was out of his control, and by the way he somberly conformed and by his stiff body language, I could tell that he was fully aware of that fact.

“Please,” Darbnix gestured. “Come in.” He finally gave the order that Davon had been waiting for.

“I come tonight with information that might help you in making an informed decision on the problematic circumstances regarding the genetic scanners,” Davon declared, instantly diving in with a professional demeanor and a somber expression.

“Okay.” Darbnix was all ears as he narrowed his eyes and inspected his crimes expert.

Davon was close enough to me that I could now read his specific title on his badge. *Computer Crimes Expert Within The Planetary Governments’ Intercontinental Law Enforcement Division.*

I was impressed, knowing this man’s intelligence must have reached prodigal genius categories, especially for Darbnix to be staring at him with such trust and respect glimmering in his eyes.

“We were actually preparing to leave town for a while until all this chaos dies down,” Darbnix

casually mentioned.

“I would advise against that, Prince, at least for now.” Davon gave his ruler a stern frown of disapproval.

“Why is that?” Darbnix asked. I continued to watch their exchange, observing as much information to absorb as possible, hoping that I would understand exactly what we might be facing with Tia and the issue of the scanner’s reliability.

“I am diligently pursuing leads,” Davon began. “I may have valid evidence of possible tampering with the scanners that could convince your brothers to finally see the light and understand the gravity of how reckless these machines can be.”

“Go on,” Darbnix coaxed.

Davon’s eyes flashed as his glance wavered between me and Darbnix. “I still have reason to believe that Julia Morse might be behind this elaborate scheme.”

“Do you also have proof that Tia Teller might be behind this tampering as well?” I belted out, unable to hide my curiosity and concern for the matter.

Davon gave me a surprised glance, but Darbnix looked at me with noble pride.

“I do believe that Tia Teller is Julia’s secret partner. Julia is probably the mastermind—”

“While Tia is her little puppet on a string,” I interjected with a harsher tone than I’d expected.

“Precisely.” Davon nodded with apprehensive approval.

“How do we stop her?” Darbnix asked.

“Well, there is one more piece of unfortunate news that I must divulge.” Davon shifted his weight somberly as he peered up at Darbnix with sorrowful eyes.

“Out with it then,” Darbnix demanded impatiently, glancing back at me.

I swallowed hard and tensed up, bracing for the impact of whatever it was that Davon might express.

He took a deep breath, taking his time in expelling the sigh. “Julia Morse and Tia Teller are using their intelligence and their attractive looks to persuade the Earth press.”

“Do you mean that they are trying to sabotage us by turning them against us?” The inflection with which Darbnix asked the question was the evidence to me that showed he already knew the miserable answer.

“Unfortunately.” Davon gave his boss an irked smile as if he hated being the bearer of bad news, but it was a tough job, and somebody had to do it.

Darbnix and I exchanged a glance. The situation was going from corrupt to worse, and we were not able to catch up with it in time before the mutilation of our characters was done.

CHAPTER 15

DARBNIX

"You must go back to her, noble Prince." Davon's expression was grave and somber as if he hated the fact that he had to be the one to enforce an unpopular rule to his beloved leader.

"What?" I stared at him, then flicked my gaze back to Rose, who gave me a boost of encouragement with her smile. "Back to *her?* That money-thirsty bitch?" I still refused to address her by her true name.

Davon nodded as he gazed at his feet. "I'm sorry, Prince."

"It's the only way," Rose said after a pause, cupping her petite hand over mine. The warmth of her touch surged through me with something tingly, immensely wonderful, and enlightening.

"I can't." I shook my head and hung my shoulders in defeat. Then, I straightened myself and gave them both a stern glance. "I already declared my love for Rose. I won't marry that wench. I will give up my throne and my power in order to maintain my principles."

"It's more than that now," Davon reminded me in a stern tone, shifting his lanky weight with his hands linked behind his back.

I walked a few steps away, needing to take a breather from the conversation that I knew was coming but that I wished to stall for as long as possible.

"Darbnix . . ." Rose's voice was like an angel floating through my mind.

"What?" I stated a little too harshly.

She remained silent. I spun around, ready to breathe fire on anyone who prevented me from being able to match myself with the only woman I wanted in the world. I was met with fearful, fretful eyes. Both Davon and Rose were staring at me with apprehension.

"I'm sorry." I approached Rose, moving closer to her to wrap my arms around her slender waist. "This entire ordeal is stressful."

"It's hard on everyone," Davon mentioned. "That's why you have me here, to keep your thoughts rational when you lose perspective."

"I haven't lost perspective," I hissed and then softened my demeanor again. "I'm sorry." This time, I

directed the apology to Davon. “It’s just . . . I already know what you are going to recommend.”

“It has to be done.” Davon continued to be vague, perhaps intentionally.

“Is she waiting back at my palace for me?” I already knew the answer to that as well.

Davon wouldn’t meet my gaze as he nodded.

I groaned, pounding my fist into the wall, nearly putting a hole through the drywall. I needed to discover some other type of medium for releasing my anger and frustration.

“We need to get to the bottom of this assumed hacking into our system and the infiltration of our scanners,” Davon explained. “Trapping Tia Teller is the best way to do that,” he encouraged. “She is smart, but she’ll also have one very prominent vulnerability that will make her weaker than normal.”

“What is that?” Rose was the one to pose the question, staring at Davon as if she couldn’t wait for the answer to be divulged.

Davon shrugged, subtly journeying farther into the room. He spoke as if the answer was obvious, but not in a condescending tone because he knew I would probably punch a hole through his face if he did so.

“She is reckless.” Davon gestured toward me. “Like Prince Darbnix mentioned before, she is going to be the first to destroy herself or blow her cover because she is money and power hungry. That desire will make her weak, easier to crack.”

A devious smile spread across my lips. “Okay . . .” I nodded. “I like the sound of that. I’m enjoying where this is going.”

“You must go back to Ms. Teller,” Davon declared. “You must gather as much information on her as you possibly can, whether that’s by conversation or by spying on her routine and daily activities. Follow her around. Notice her habits. Familiarize yourself with her belongings. That way, if anything stands out, you’ll be the first to recognize it.”

“He has a point.” Rose had her arms folded across her chest as she listened intently, raising an eyebrow.

“I know,” I grumbled, heaving a deep breath as I slowly walked in a little circle of my own uncertainty.

Maybe if I kept myself physically busy, I would eventually be able to rest my mind. I just couldn’t even fathom the idea of appealing to the horrid personality of Tia Teller. The concept of appeasing her, giving her kindness and attention . . .well, it was not only daunting to my stomach and mind, but sickening as well.

I gave Davon a twisted smile laced with bitterness. My mood was sour, even if I knew he was right and I would have to relent in the end.

“If I gain some knowledge on her, then maybe we will have enough to snag her up for being a suspect in the crime we have yet to prove?” Even as the question came out of my mouth, I knew that it sounded both outlandish and plausible.

“That’s right.” Davon nodded with approval.

Rose sighed behind me with ragged stress revealed in the way she released the oxygen from her lungs.

I turned around and took her hands in mine, gently stroking them until I was sure she was pacified to a rational level.

“I’m sorry . . .” I trailed off, feeling as if my apology was inferior. “I hate that you are having to be wrapped up in this turmoil. I wish there were something I could do.” I gave her a feeble smile.

Rose didn’t look as disheartened as before. “It’s okay,” she whispered softly, pulling herself up on her tiptoes to tenderly give me a kiss on the lips. “You can make it up to me by catching this woman in the act.”

“I have reason to believe that Ms. Teller is the puppet on the string,” Davon admitted. “Julia Morse is probably the one who is the ringleader of this operation, but—”

“That’s where I come in,” I interrupted with an assertive nod. “I will do my best to cast a wide net and bait Tia Teller. It’s an opportunity that I won’t let slip through my fingers.”

I gave Rose a sympathetic glance which was returned by the determined set to her eyes, blazing with cooperation into mine.

I walked over to her, snaking my arms around her waist and giving her a gentle hug of affection. I hoped she would be able to feel my energy, to be consoled in the way I was holding onto her.

“I’ll be back for you,” I whispered privately into her ear so that Davon wouldn’t overhear. “I promise.”

Rose gave me a warm, affectionate smile. “I know you will,” she whispered back, her eyes shining with trust.

The prospect of snuggling up to Tia at night, sharing a bed with her, made me nauseated. I was in the eye of the storm, but I would soon face the wrath of the winds lashing at me, emotionally and physically.

There was nothing I could do. I simply had to face the storm head on, in the form of a drawling blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo who wanted me for my money. Two could play at this game. In the end, there would only be one winner, and I gave myself the mental assurance that it would be me.

“Davon, do you mind if I speak to Rose privately for a minute?” I turned around to address him.

“Of course.” Davon swiftly bowed and spun on his heel to leave the house. “I’ll be in touch if receive advisement of any developments in the case,” he called out over his shoulder before disappearing from view and sealing the door behind him.

I turned around to focus my attention back to Rose. “I promise, I will never marry that vile woman.” I firmed my jaw, giving her a gaze that I never wanted to pull away from.

“I know.” Rose stared at her hands and heaved a heavy-hearted sigh. “I trust you. It’s her I don’t

trust."

"She won't touch me," I declared assertively. "I won't allow her to lay a finger on me under any circumstances."

Rose breezed past me to glance out the window. A noncommittal expression hovered on her features. She was turned partially away from me, so it was difficult to wager what her eyes might reveal behind the external pain.

I allowed her to stew and fester in her thoughts for a few moments, giving her a pause. I stood as still as a statue behind her.

Eventually, she turned back around to face me with resilience in her gaze.

"Just promise me one thing," she said.

"Anything." I drifted to stand by her side, taking her hands in mine once again to cradle them there for warmth and security that fed both of us.

"Don't sleep with her." Rose's eyes flashed with disapproval.

I faltered. "I might have to share a bed with her to make it believable—"

"Don't have sex with her," she specified.

I bellowed with laughter. "Are you serious? Not in a million years would I *ever* agree to consensual intimate relations with that gold-digging bitch."

Rose smirked, as if she approved of my name calling and was both humored and relieved by my response.

"Thank you. That will reassure me more." She smiled and squeezed my hands with hers.

There was a moment where we both stared deeply into each other's eyes. My heart raced. I wished that I could rip her clothes off and take her right there on the living room floor, but I knew that wasn't a possibility right now. I had to get back to Tia. If anything, she would be expecting a response from me. The world would be expecting a response from me. I couldn't leave anyone hanging. It was important that I played the part.

"I'm off to display some of my finest acting skills," I joked.

Rose's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Hopefully, it will be an Oscar-worthy performance."

One thing was certain. I had to convince Tia that I was prepared to play the role of doting husband. If she didn't buy my behavior, this failsafe plan was bound to crash and burn. The act had to go off without a hitch. I would either be able to schmooze her with my fakeness, or she would be smart enough to suspect something.

If Davon was right, though, that would make my job at selling my relationship with Tia even more successful. She was money hungry and focused on power. It was a weak link that I aimed to take advantage of.

I WALKED THROUGH THE DISAPPEARING WALLS IN MY PALACE ENTRANCE, ALREADY HEARING THE demands and squeals of Tia's farm-girl accent echoing through the hallways. I groaned and rolled my eyes, mentally preparing myself to enter the snake pit.

"I told you, I want the salmon and the crab cakes for the reception, *not* the pork roast or the filet mignon!" Tia was verbalizing an exceptionally loud complaint, undoubtedly at one of the kitchen staff members.

"Tia, always a pleasure." My voice dripped with sarcasm that I wished I hadn't been so weak as to expose.

I entered the room and gave her a feigned smile through clenched teeth, biting my tongue until I tasted blood in order to prevent myself from immediately pouncing on her with a verbal display of my true emotions.

"Darbnix!' Tia exclaimed, raising her hands above her head and squealing as she jogged enthusiastically toward me.

I noticed that her voluptuous chest was even more revealing today with a deep plunging neckline to her black dress that fit her curves like a glove. I wondered if she had already attempted to start spending my money to replenish her wardrobe with the finest and most luxurious clothes that wealth could buy.

She pressed her chest to me as soon as she reached my side. I gave her a reluctant hug but didn't close my hands in around the small of her back like I would have with Rose. Rose was still front and center in my mind. I tried to shift my focus on exposing any secrets Tia might inadvertently have to offer, but I was prepared to expect it to take some time.

"I missed you so much, baby." Tia batted her eyelashes at me, stroked my arm with her perfectly manicured nails, and purred into my ears.

My skin was crawling, but I took a deep breath and put on my fakest face, diving right into my bag of acting skills.

"I just needed some time to think and regroup . . ." I trailed off, uncertain of how I should approach the subject with her.

"And?" She paused, her hands planted on my chest. She raised her eyebrows and gave me an expectant look.

"I will agree to take things slowly with you," I admitted, hoping this declaration would buy me some time.

"Take things slowly?" Tia wrinkled her nose and frowned as if this new information didn't sit well with her. "Baby, we are getting *married*. There's no time to take things slowly!" She laughed and swayed her hips against my groin in a seductive way.

Just as I had suspected when I finally encountered her again, my sexual ambition and drive for

pursuing a female were halted, dead in their tracks as soon as I had walked within ten feet of her.

I knew I had to cooperate and compromise for the good of the cause at hand, so I did my best to gently appease her and keep her from throwing an abominable tantrum. After all, I had to make it look like I was succumbing to the plan to marry Tia as my genetic-scanned mate.

It was a difficult task, but I had to remain up for the challenge. The will of the machine called out to me. The truth must be exposed, no matter how long it took for progress to be underway.

I tried my best to subtly wiggle free from Tia's steely grip, but it was no use. She was holding onto me for dear life, as if she just knew deep down in her heart that if she let me go, I'd escape her tyrant motives forever.

"Let's go to bed." Tia giggled in her Southern drawl. "I want to experience for myself what sex with a Trilyn prince is really like."

She began petting my chest with one hand and stroking my back with the other. She wouldn't let go of me, no matter how hard I tried to squirm away from her.

"Maybe we should have dinner and get to know each other before we go straight to the bedroom." I chuckled apprehensively, already being emotionally pelted with guilt for Rose even though I hadn't laid more than a platonic finger on Tia.

I pulled away from Tia as slightly as I could without causing her to go into a fit of frustration or expose any clues that I wasn't even remotely interested in any of her advances.

"I'm only hungry for one thing, darling." She slid her tongue seductively over her teeth and gave me an eager grin, poking out her ample bosom in the process.

She gave me a triumphant smile as if she were relishing in getting her way and wasn't used to being told no to anything, ever. She had the flair of a beauty queen, but those things were bogus and held no interest for me.

"Dinner first," I persisted, this time a little harder with a forceful inflection in my voice.

"Oh, all right." She pouted out her bottom lip like a sullen, spoiled child. She batted her wide blue eyes at me. "If that's what my handsome prince wants—"

"Yes," I interrupted before she could try to manipulate me any further.

Tia's display of affection was disgusting and sickening, but I tried not to look at her as if I were completely turned off by everything she said or did. She was as phony as her fake tan.

I instructed her to follow me to the dining hall that was elaborately lit with crystal and diamond chandeliers overlooking a twelve-seater mahogany table adorned with the finest china you could find in all of Trilynia. The plates and bowls had real gold ingrained into the rims.

The wall to wall windows provided a panoramic view of the city of Topeka below the hovering palace.

"Oh, my *God*," Tia whispered as she floated over to the windows, gazing down with awe and

amazement shimmering in her electric blue eyes.

It might have been the first time since our chance meeting that I wasn't actually seething with resentment and hostility toward her.

"Impressive, isn't it?" I beamed as I approached her, standing next to her with my hands behind my back.

Tia stared at me with her mouth agape, speechless for the first time since our first meeting.

"It's incredible . . ." She trailed off, her voice like the wings of a butterfly fluttering through the breeze.

The city lights from the buildings below our feet shimmered like tiny stars off in the distance.

"Your meal is now prepared, Noble Prince." I turned around as one of my kitchen staff members gave me a polite and professional bow, skirting from the room with a meek and quiet exit.

"Shall we?" I smiled at Tia, wondering if maybe this problematic issue of having to entertain her and pretend to be interested in her shenanigans and conversation wasn't going to be as horrific as I had earlier assumed.

She held out her hand for me to take, and reluctantly, I did, keeping a loose grip as we drifted back over to the table. I moved her chair out for her before sitting myself, because it had been hardwired into my brain to be a gentleman no matter the circumstances, or in this case, the wretched company.

As soon as we sat down, Tia raised her wine glass. "To us," she beamed, almost to the point of being aggressively territorial.

I coughed and swallowed hard, nearly choking on the bite of food in my mouth. I hesitantly raised my glass and clinked it against the side of hers. It made a shimmering sound that sliced through the air and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I didn't know if it was an ominous omen, but I suddenly didn't feel hungry anymore.

Tia proceeded to gulp down the entire glass of wine before consuming any food. I stared at her as if she were a zoo animal doing tricks behind the glass. "Are you sure you don't want to eat something?" I was concerned that she was going to become intoxicated quickly.

She sloppily picked up her fork and plucked a potato from the plate, casually plopping it into her mouth. She chewed it a few times before I watched her visibly swallow. She was still holding onto her wine glass, pouring more from the bottle on the table as it sloshed around inside.

"Is my handsome prince happy now?" she crooned in a teasing, taunting voice.

I let out a gruff sound, originating deep in my throat. That was the only response I could muster. After another few minutes of Tia buzzing about the plans for the wedding, I felt like I was going to vomit up the food I'd just swallowed. I just couldn't hear another single word about it.

I tossed my cloth napkin onto the table beside my plate. I propped my elbows up on the surface and rubbed my aching temples, which were pounding with irritation. Did this woman ever shut her mouth?

Eventually, Tia began to notice my discomfort. She shoved her chair back and jogged over to my side of the table, her perky breasts bouncing through her revealing dress along the way.

“Oh, my goodness,” she breathed as if she were playing the lead in a play. “What is wrong with my big, strong, handsome man?”

Tia did her best to attempt to sit on my lap, but I wouldn’t scoot my chair out enough to make it possible for her to fit.

“I’m fine,” I grumbled as she started to stroke my back again.

“You don’t seem fine,” she protested in a sultry voice. “Let’s get you to bed.”

There she went again, trying to seduce me. Hell would freeze over before I would agree to have sex with her.

“I’m feeling tired tonight.” I glanced up at her, locking eyes. I grimaced, bracing for impact from the tantrum that was sure to follow.

“I know how to wake you up,” she whispered devilishly into my ear, making me internally cringe.

“That’s not necessary.” I chuckled politely, swatting her hand away.

“What’s wrong with you?” she sulked, borderline shouting.

“Nothing is wrong with me. I’m just tired, that’s all. There have been a lot of stressful things on my mind lately.”

“That’s nothing a little lovemaking can’t fix,” she cooed into my ear as she pushed my chair back and finally made her way to straddling my lap.

“No.” My tone was too gruff.

Tia’s eyes looked wounded and her mouth pursed in shock. She immediately jumped off my lap, visibly seething with clenched fists. I was like a deer in headlights, unable to move until I saw what she might do next.

“You can’t say no to me. I’m your *bride*,” she hissed through a locked jaw. Her cheeks were pink with frustration.

My tongue was sharp. I got myself in trouble too often with my loose mouth. “You aren’t my bride yet.”

Tia gasped, clearly appalled by my brazen denial of her requested love affair. Did she think she could just get me into bed that easily, without any effort? She picked up my wine glass, still full to the brim because I had yet to take even a sip.

She clutched it with white knuckles, her expression furious. “One way or another, you are going to be mine.” Her tone was both malicious and victorious. Then in one swoop, she raised her arm still clutching the wine glass. She slammed her fist down, and the wine glass plummeted to the glass bottom floor below us, shattering into a million pieces.

I stood up in shock, pushing myself back. “What the hell was that for?”

She picked up another wine glass, this time an empty one that had been set at the table by accident. “I’ll do it again,” she warned, determined to get her way.

“Tia . . .” I trailed off, giving her a pitying stare as if she were deranged and needed professional therapy.

She threw the wine glass against the wall this time and again achieved the same effect. The glass shattered in a millisecond.

This task was going to be more complicated than I had initially expected. I wasn’t off to a fantastic start either. This was going to take more work than even I could have imagined.

CHAPTER 16

ROSE

"It's going to be okay, Madam." Davon sympathetically smiled in my direction.

I tried to give him a feeble smile in return. "Thanks . . ." I trailed off, glancing out the window as the rain began to fall and splatter against the edge of the window, leaving trails of translucent water droplets that slid down the pane.

I was mesmerized by the liquid pouring down in heavier sheets as the minutes ticked by. I didn't know how to entertain myself or distract my rabid emotions. Davon had returned several nights later to check on me.

I had yet to hear from Darbnix, even though he had promised to keep me abreast of everything that was happening during his compromising time with Tia Teller. The goal was to obtain insider information on whether she might be directly involved in a hacking heist. Both Darbnix and Davon suspected Tia to have some kind of role in the computer system infiltration, and unfortunately for Darbnix and myself, he had been their prime target.

There was a quiet pause between us. Davon was lanky and awkward, but there was a peace in his demeanor that made me feel relaxed and calmed me down a few notches. I glanced at him as he lingered on the edge of the couch as if he were waiting for me to instruct or direct him to do something. His hands remained poised in his lap. He fleetingly glimpsed at me and then posed his gaze back to his feet.

"Do you want something to drink?" I offered. "Tea? Water?"

"Oh, no, Madam." Davon fervently shook his head in denial. "I assure you, I am not thirsty." His tone was professional, almost robotic.

"Okay." I sighed, cradling my head in my hand as I continued to gaze out the window. I absentmindedly began to stroke my long red braid with my other free hand. "Just let me know if you change your mind."

"Might I ask you something, Madam?" Davon proposed.

I turned to glance at him with a smile. "You can call me Rose."

"I'd prefer to call you Dr. Rand, if something other than Madam," Davon said as if we were opening up a debate on how to address me.

I shrugged, too mentally exhausted to argue the point. “Sure. Dr. Rand is fine.” I shifted my feet in front of me in my seated position. “What do you want to ask me?”

Davon paused as if he was afraid to breach a subject that might be none of his business. “You seem . . .” he trailed off reluctantly.

“What?” I pressed in a nervous tone, narrowing my eyes and locking them on his dark features.

“I don’t know,” he started. “Suffering?” His voice inflected that he was merely guessing.

I swallowed hard and turned away so that the truth of his bold statement wouldn’t be revealed through the expression in my eyes.

“It’s hard to imagine Darbnix with another woman,” I admitted after some hesitance. Davon seemed trustworthy and honorable, so I didn’t see any threat in confessing that private frustration to him.

“I’m sure it must be difficult,” he said as he craned his neck to look suspiciously out the window. I followed his action, turning back around with confusion. “What is it?” I asked. “Do you see someone there?”

“No.” Davon frowned. “I just enjoy watching the rain.”

I smiled, feeling a connection we had in common. “Me too.”

“I find it relaxing,” he added with a casual smile.

“And cozy,” I mentioned.

We made eye contact and it was like something clicked. We understood each other, and we both had the same motives and purpose in life. He was intelligent, a computer crimes expert. I was also intelligent, a veterinarian trained to take care of and save exo-livestock farm animals. The similarities regarding our background and our histories blended together in a natural way.

I started laughing, but it came out sounding more like a bitter scoff.

Davon gave me a perplexed expression. “Is something wrong?”

I stood up, ready to pace the room until my mind was satiated, until the turmoil stopped shouting at me via my own thoughts.

“I just can’t stand it.” I shook my head and pinched the area above my nose and between my eyes.

Davon still stared at me with confusion marking his features. “I don’t understand.”

I wanted to shout and stomp my foot and cry. I wanted to whine that it wasn’t fair that the terrible Tia Teller got her way. She was the one entertaining Prince Darbnix when I loved him. I could take care of him. We could have so much fun together, making memories as we went along. But she was the roadblock I hadn’t expected, the one who’d sent my joyous foundation crumbling to the ground.

Instead of throwing a tantrum and making a huge scene, I decided to take a deep breath instead and close my eyes for a few moments, pausing before answering Davon and explaining the complicated fragments of emotions within my mind.

I shook my head as an ironic smirk stretched across my lips.

It took me a few minutes before I was able to gain enough strength to look at Davon, because I knew he would be able to read the pain and frustration lingering in my heart.

"Just . . . imagining Darbnix there with *her.*" I spat the world out as if it were sour on my tongue. "It's crazy." I shook my head again. "I'm sorry. I'm just thinking out loud."

"You are venting," Davon said.

"Yeah." I shrugged. "I guess you are probably right."

"It's okay to vent every now and then." He gave me a kindhearted smile that made me feel warmer than usual.

"Just picturing him faking being with her, pretending to love her or cuddling up to her . . ." I trailed off because my stomach was doing flips, inverting on itself.

"He doesn't love her," Davon reassured me. "He's simply doing a performance in order to expose the truth. It's the one compromise he can't get out of because if he doesn't pull it off, the entire foundation cracks. We will never be able to track her or nail her for this crime if he doesn't succeed."

I met Davon's gaze. There was an intensity blazing in his eyes that scared me, but I fully understood what he was trying to explain to me.

"I get it," I whispered humbly. "He has no choice in the matter."

"Oh, he has a choice," Davon chimed. "He's just making the smart one that will reap the most benefit, whether it's uncomfortable to think about or not."

I finally caved and gave Davon the smile he deserved. "Well, when you put it that way . . ."

"It's purely a job," he explained. "Nothing more."

I made a soft humming sound as I wandered back over to the window, planting myself in the same chair. I lifted the curtain again so I could stare outside and picture something else besides my vivid imagination torturing me.

He wouldn't sleep with her. He promised me, and I had no choice but to believe him. I trusted his love. It was pure, it was divine, it was noble. There was magic that sparked around us when we were together. If I could just cling to that energy, that chemistry, then maybe I wouldn't drive myself absolutely nuts while awaiting his promised return.

I yawned and stretched. I was getting exhausted. I needed to shut my mind off for a while. Sleep would do me some good. It would heal my soul and help me recharge my batteries. Besides, it was still raining. What better sound to listen to while you tried to lull yourself to sleep? The factors were aligning in my favor.

I glanced over at Davon, whose eyes were fluttering closed.

"Do you want to stay here overnight?" I offered.

He glanced up at me. “Hmm?” He looked surprised by my suggestion.

I shrugged. “It’s getting late, and it’s still raining in sheets out there.” I pointed out the window. “You should stay.”

Davon frowned. “Do you feel like you need the protection?”

I mentally debated this scenario. “Maybe.”

Davon squared his shoulders proudly. “I would be honored to serve you tonight with protection to make you feel safer.”

I smiled. He was so lanky and awkward, but at the same time, he was perfectly sweet and knew exactly how to charm me. “Thank you,” I whispered softly. “You can stay in my guest room if you’d like.”

Davon’s eyes gleamed. “That sounds very lovely. I promise not to bother you unless you need my services.”

I chuckled. “Come on.” I gestured for him to follow me down the hallway.

I already knew that Davon wouldn’t lay a finger on me. He was too pure, too innocent in certain ways when it came to being around women.

“Here’s your room.” I flicked on the light switch and moved aside to allow him access. “I always keep fresh sheets on the bed.”

My dogs had been sleeping in the room, and as they heard my voice, they began to rouse and stretch, yawning and looking bleary-eyed as they tried to sniff at Davon’s pants with curiosity.

“They won’t hurt you,” I promised. “In fact, if they had any kind of inkling that you were a dangerous person, they would be snarling at you and barking like crazy.”

Davon smiled. “I enjoy animals. I know that Darbnix is fond of them too. He has so many back at his farm in Noor.” Davon spoke with a sad nostalgia crackling in his voice.

“Yeah, I know.” I bit my bottom lip and smiled. “That’s just one of the many things we have in common.”

“He’s lucky to have you,” Davon said as we locked eyes.

“Thanks.” I blushed at the compliment.

If only he were here with me now. He should be here with me. He was supposed to be. I had to be patient. I had to wait out the storm because the dawn of a new day would bring sunshine and warmth just waiting for me across the horizon.

I harbored the strength and resolve within my spirit to wait for him. Patience was a virtue. My mother always loved that saying, and it was my reality, at least for now. I had to exercise trust. I could always daydream about him lying beside me, protecting me with his strong and sturdy body. I craved to feel his muscles and his body pressed up next to mine. I would have to remain stoically positive that the outcome would lean in my favor.

“Good night,” I said to Davon, giving him a smile before venturing back through the living room. My dogs would need to go out to use the bathroom before I set off to bed for the night. Luckily for me, I wouldn’t have to emerge from beneath the awning in my backyard because I had a fence. Besides, my dogs would never leave unattended. They were trained and smart. Hopefully, they would just go do their business and race back to me before getting soaking wet.

“Have a peaceful sleep.” Davon gave me a grin as he closed the bedroom door to the guest room.

At least I wouldn’t have to wake up in the morning in anxious seclusion. Being alone with my thoughts was the most dangerous situation I could place myself in. Davon could be my temporary crutch, giving me pep talks to get me through this trying and difficult time. For now, it was time to get some rest so that I could wake up somewhat rejuvenated to press through with a new batch of energy to do it all over again in the morning.

I WOKE UP BEFORE ANY CRACK OF DAYLIGHT BEGAN TO EMERGE FROM THE SKY AND TRICKLE THROUGH my bedroom window. I couldn’t sleep. I had tossed and turned all night under the milky glow of the moon. It had finally stopped raining at about two in the morning. I had achieved nothing more than a fitful sleep, but at five thirty, I finally gave up and wandered into my kitchen, fumbling through the darkness to turn on the light.

I absentmindedly started going through the rhythmic daily routine, briefly forgetting the fact that Davon was still at my house, hopefully sleeping more peacefully than I had been able to.

I silently began setting a pot of coffee to brew, then leaned my back against the side of my kitchen counter while my dogs silently wandered around me in a circle. Their little paws made shuffling, scratching noises against the tile floor. It was time for me to trim the nails back on their paws.

“Are you hungry?” I whispered as I nuzzled my neck against their fur, scratching their backs while their tails wagged in blissful harmony.

I set about my kitchen, shuffling through items to prepare my mug of coffee. I poured some dry dog food into their bowls and inhaled a deep breath of the Italian roast blend, the type of coffee beans I preferred over any other kind.

I poured the delicious dark liquid into my favorite mug from veterinary school and took a glorious and refreshing sip. Now my senses could awaken with the crest of a new day.

After a few minutes of checking my voice mails and work emails at my desk adjacent to the kitchen, I heard life stirring down the hallway. Davon emerged, still wearing the same clothes he had on the night before, but his shoes were off.

“Good morning.” I smiled.

“Morning.” He scratched the back of his head, looking even more awkward and sheepish than usual.

“Would you like some coffee? Breakfast?” I offered.

“Coffee sounds wonderful.”

“I have a fresh pot still in the kitchen,” I told him. “It should still be hot too.”

“Wonderful.” Davon trekked his way there and I followed behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder. “Are you feeling any better about Darbnix and Ms. Teller today?” He asked, his voice in a tone that mirrored his simple curiosity and wish to strike up a casual conversation.

“Not really.” I groaned.

Davon smiled as he drew the cup of coffee up to his lips. He took a sip and I watched him swallow.

“Might I tell you a story that could perhaps make you feel better about this whole situation?” he suggested.

“Please.” I gestured with my hands out in front of me. “Be my guest. That would be great, actually.”

“It’s a story about me and my wife,” he declared. I watched his features change to peace and harmony.

“You are married?” I didn’t mean for my voice to sound so surprised at the realization.

“I’ve been married for a number of years,” he stated dreamily.

“Congratulations,” I told him, mainly because I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“She is also from Earth,” he admitted. “Her name is Isabella and she is my whole world. She is exotic and beautiful. She has long, flowing black hair.”

“Oh, wow,” I said, fully intrigued and prepared to immerse myself in his story. “She sounds amazing.”

A glazed look of passion filled Davon’s eyes and he beamed with a look on his face that declared pure, unconditional love.

“My parents did not approve of her,” he stated in a bitter tone. “They didn’t want me to be with her.”

“Why not?” I frowned and leaned closer to him, waiting expectantly.

Davon met my gaze and inhaled a deep breath. “She is not from Trilynia. It makes her impure in the eyes of my parents.”

I chuckled and shifted my weight. “I think that’s a moot point now.”

The edges of Davon’s mouth curled with amusement. “I suppose you are right about that. But this was back then, more than ten years ago.”

“You’ve been married ten years?” I shrieked, surprised by the revelation.

Davon smiled nostalgically. “Twelve, actually.”

“Twelve years,” I stated dreamily, suddenly jealous of Davon, wondering if I had already lost my window for marrying my soulmate. In this case, the one person I believed to be my true match as far

as connection and chemistry went was Darbnix.

“They weren’t always blissful,” he clarified. “We have endured our fare share of trials.” A shadow cast across Davon’s features as quickly as the happiness had appeared.

“Your parents didn’t approve?” I coaxed him.

“Right.” He cleared his throat and stood up a little straighter, crossing his arms over his chest. “They told me that if I married her, they would not support me or the wedding.”

“That’s terrible.” I frowned and placed my hand on his arm with sympathy.

“I have not spoken to my parents in twelve years . . .” he trailed off with pain lacing his voice.

I gasped in reaction. “Oh, my God. Are you *serious*?”

There was struggle and grief reflecting like a mirror in Davon’s eyes as he finally made contact with mine.

“They disowned me for marrying her. They said that I would be diluting their bloodline.” He stared at his shoes with contempt at the horrible memory of the situation that clearly gnawed at him.

“I’m so sorry you are having to go through that,” I said in a sympathetic tone. “It just seems like such an unfair compromise. Especially because the Trilyn race is losing hope of reproducing and breeding among themselves.” It was the exact reason Darbnix and his brothers had to walk around carrying a genetic device, just waiting for the scanner to light up and pronounce their biological match.

Davon game me a sardonic smirk. “Ironic, isn’t it?”

I nodded, glancing down. “I suppose it is.” I was no closer to finding any answers than he was.

“I just wanted to give you an example of the great lengths a man in love will go for the woman he passionately loves.”

I gave him a heartfelt smile. “Thank you. It is consoling and reassuring on a certain level to know that there is still hope out there. Your story had a romantic ending, but it sounds bittersweet.”

Davon smiled and glanced out the window. “Bittersweet, indeed.”

Davon was right. Darbnix was just desperately clinging on to the one hope left to pursue. If he didn’t try to spy on Tia Teller in order to either get her to talk or infiltrate his way into discovering her flawed plan, then we would never get our answers. He would be forced to marry her with no questions asked. There was no indirect way of achieving the information without his getting close to her. There was no choice left in the matter for either of us. It was just something we would have to endure.

“Is your wife here on Earth with you?” I asked, making small talk to keep the conversation going. I was afraid that if there were silence between us, I might go crazy from the frail mental state I was already in.

Davon opened his mouth to respond when I heard a jolting boom bellow through my front door. I jumped and shrieked at the loud noise as it shook through my house like a cymbal crashing.

I glanced at Davon, gauging his reaction. He seemed just as shocked and rattled as I was. “What was that?” I panted, gripping the side of my countertop.

Davon stuttered, stumbling over his words. “I don’t know—”

He made a brave stride toward the front of the house, stopping short just before the crashing noise came once again. There was genuine fear splashed across his face, making me realize that if this was an ambush or an attack, I could trust that he was probably not behind it in any way.

In the next instant, Trilyn military guards wearing Darbnix’s house crest and wielding machine guns marched into my house, barreling through my front door as if it was a piece of plastic hindering their way.

The door broke completely off the hinges and fell with a loud thud onto my front porch. I screamed and braced myself. I had no idea what they were doing in my house or why their angry faces displayed defiance and greedy power-hungry flashes of hostility.

“What is the meaning of this?” Davon didn’t have a chance in his already awkward and lanky state.

The men were too burly and strong. They pushed right past him as if he was a twig to snap under their boots.

The frontrunner snarled at me with a devious sneer that curled his lips in a wicked way, making my skin crawl. I stifled a rising scream that bubbled in my throat, swallowing it down.

“Who are you and what do you want?” I stated, holding my ground. This was my house, my dwelling ground. I would not be forcefully attacked in my own refuge.

“Captain Henders of the 97th Wing Police Unit of the Continent and District of Noor,” the man stated with venom dripping in his tone.

“What are you doing in my *house*?” I pressed again with more urgency. I glanced at Davon who was as pale as a crisp white sheet drying under the blazing sun.

I balled my fists, prepared to fight off these men by myself if that’s what it took to regain control of the situation and protect myself.

“We are sent here under direct orders of Prince Darbnix of the district and continent of Noor,” the captain, apparently named Henders, chanted almost robotically.

“Is he coming for me?” I squealed, briefly cheered by the slim chance that he might have changed his mind about appeasing the sexy yet fake Tia Teller.

Captain Henders’s jaw tightened and his eyes flashed with something furious, but he didn’t flinch or skip a beat.

“We are here under the direct orders of Prince Darbnix to arrest you for the disruption of justice and tampering with private property, along with manipulation on behalf of a Trilyn prince.”

“What?” I choked. The entire reasoning sounded false and preposterous. Was that even something real that held any ground or merit to arrest someone? Nothing this man was spewing my way made any

sense.

I glanced over at Davon, pleading with my eyes as I searched his face for some recognition, some kind of defense here. I needed him to come to my aid, if only for a few seconds.

The men grabbed me by my arms, abruptly yanking me. My skin began to blaze and sting under the aggressive lock and grip of their gloved hands over my arms.

“Stop it!” I shouted in desperation, flailing my body as I attempted to wiggle free. “Let me go!”

“You have no right!” Davon finally shouted, coming to my rescue, or at least pursuing a favorable outcome to this chaotic mess we were in.

“Tell it to the prince,” one of the guards snarled as he spat in Davon’s direction. “Come on, woman,” he said and tugged me in the direction of the broken front door.

“Get off me!” I continued to shout. “You cannot do this to me! It is not allowed!”

It was no use. There were too many of them and only one of me. “Let me go!” I wailed in vain.

“There is no way these are Darbnix’s orders,” Davon called out cynically behind me. “Dr. Rand has Earth citizen rights which you are blatantly violating!”

His protests became fainter and fainter as the guards pushed me through the grass. At one point, I fell to the ground, crumbling in a heap. I skinned my knee as I fell against the pavement, reeling in the searing initial pain.

“Get up, woman.” One of the guards kicked me in the back, causing me to roar with pain.

“Earth citizen rights!” I heard Davon’s panic-stricken voice still lashing out behind me, but there was nothing he could do. There was nothing anyone could do. I was going with these men against my will, whether I liked it or not.

CHAPTER 17

DARBNIX

The sound of Tia's snickering, vicious laughter bellowed through the walls in my palace, sending the alarm bells in my mind flaring wildly out of control. There was something about the condescending sneering laughter that choked from her lips that made me realize something terrible must have happened, something horrifying that only a devious person like Tia would relish or appreciate.

The rest of normal society would curl its toes if it knew the kind of unimaginable deviant she really was behind closed doors. Tia Teller was nothing more than a phony fraud beneath the pounds of caked-on makeup and the shimmering golden locks of hair floating with elegant grace down her back.

The more time I was forced to spend with Tia, the more I began to realize how sinister she was underneath the drapes of her protective shield of emotions. She was a snake in the grass, just waiting to pounce on her enemies or anyone stupid or vulnerable enough to fall into her trap.

Her false, small-town girl vibes were locked tight away behind closed doors, and I was a fair witness to the trials she would ultimately bring to me if I ended up actually following through and marrying her. It couldn't happen. She would destroy the empire I had worked so hard to build on Noor without even batting an eye.

I had to make sure that a marriage between me and Tia Teller never saw the light of day.

I followed the sound of her shrill laughter as it carried through the hallways, crashing through my eardrums like a cymbal or a gong ringing out impending doom.

"I promise, this is going to be the most hysterical and wonderful thing that has ever happened," I heard her croon in her Southern drawl as soon as I got close enough to eavesdrop on her conversation.

It appeared as if she was on the phone with someone. Her cellphone was pressed up to her ear and her blonde hair fell in waves down her back. She wasn't facing me. For the time being, she was blissfully unaware that I loomed close behind her, inspecting her like a hawk.

"Can you believe Darbnix's foolish guards actually *believed* me when I convinced them that he was behind the snatching?" Her snickering voice made my skin crawl.

I cracked my knuckles, urging myself to resist the temptation to pounce on her and force her to divulge

what she was talking about. Instead, I kept my cool. I inhaled a deep breath and waited it out, just trying to listen for whatever other information she would sickeningly deliver.

"I imagine the poor girl is just trembling with fright." Tia laughed wickedly, swirling her French manicured fingernails through the air.

That was the last straw for me. I couldn't stand idly by and allow her to destroy my life any longer, and now it sounded as if she had involved Rose in some way. I would never stop trying to protect Rose. I would go to any length to ensure her safety. I would never allow this scheming bitch to get in the way of my true happiness.

"What have you done?" My voice thundered like a lightning bolt pelting through an angry purple sky.

I burst through the room like a thief in the night on a mission. "What have you done?" I roared again.

Tia's blue eyes widened with dread and horror. She looked like a deer in headlights, caught in the act of doing something sneaky and wretched. She jumped a few inches in the air and squealed in shock, dropping the phone in a blind haze.

"What?" she stammered. She fumbled to a crouching position, immediately snatching her phone back and pressing the receiver back to her ear. "I'll have to call you back . . ." she trailed off to the mystery person on the other end.

She punched the *End Call* button with her thumb and slammed the phone onto her bed. When she turned around to address me again, her eyes were like jagged daggers, slicing a hole through my spirit.

"How dare you interrupt my private conversation," she snarled maliciously. She bravely took a step in my direction, leering at me as if I was the one who was somehow at fault and in the wrong.

I scoffed bitterly. "It looks to me, Tia," I stated sardonically, "that *you* are the one who has some explaining to do."

Tia huffed and puffed, turning red-faced as she stammered for a way to weasel her way out of this one.

"What did you *do?"* I asked more aggressively.

Tia squared her shoulders defiantly. "I didn't do anything," she hissed. "Maybe you should check your facts before you assume something that you know nothing about. I believe it's time for you to get your facts straight."

She crossed her arms over her chest and refused to speak another word about it, or who she was talking about. I had a right mind to detain her, to get her to crack, but she was right. I didn't have enough evidence gathered against her to do anything about it. Judging by the twisted arrogant smug curled across Tia's lips, she knew it too.

Then, as if she were shifting gears completely and putting on a different face and demeanor altogether, Tia smiled. Her smile was seductive and blazing with superiority.

"I was just talking to my sister," Tia purred, seductively taking a few steps toward me while I did my

best to subtly draw back to widen the gap between us. “I don’t know what you think you might have heard, but we were just talking about the wedding.”

I didn’t know how she had recovered so quickly. I had to hand it to the woman. She was under the impression that she was fooling me when she wasn’t, but I needed to play along. It took two to tango, and in this case, I would just pretend to follow her lead.

She had picked herself back up at the drop of a hat and come up with a swift excuse. She was a master at her craft. As much as I detested her, I had to give her respect for thinking quickly on her feet.

I knew she was lying, but I was already afraid that I had said too much by brashly snapping at her, catapulting myself into the room in an accusatory manner. I still wasn’t sure what I had overheard, and I didn’t want to make Tia any more suspicious than she already was. She would be keeping a close eye on me, as I was on her. I needed to rewind a bit so that I could catch her off guard again.

I gave her a smile sealed through false pretenses, altering my mood in a visible heartbeat. “You are right, honey,” I crooned respectfully through gritted teeth. “I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that. I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to invade your privacy.” I had to choke out the words because internally, I was screaming inside to be able to pounce on her lies and expose the truth.

I just didn’t have the evidence stacked up against her yet to succeed. I needed more information.

“Perhaps I overreacted.” I smiled again in an effort to reassure the still wide-eyed and startled Tia that I had made a mistake. My conscience was killing me to be this silky and kind to her.

Tia finally smiled, swooning as she slowly strutted toward me with magnetic blue eyes. “I will forgive you this time.” There was a slight warning tone in her voice that made my skin crawl. As soon as she approached me within an inch or two, she placed her flattened palm against my chest. “Everybody deserves a second chance.” Her whisper shattered my eardrums with something dreadful and ominous that I couldn’t nail my finger on.

I swallowed hard. “Right . . .” I trailed off cautiously.

“You’d better be on your best behavior.” She began to cackle in her Southern drawl. An icy threat flashed briefly in her eyes.

I studied her as she floated about the room, buzzing like an electrified butterfly. I narrowed my eyes and waited like an owl perched on a tree, observing her to see what she would do next. My breath was suspended in my lungs. She made me wither with stiff uncomfortableness that was hard to keep at bay.

“I have so much to do to prepare for the wedding, darling.” She yawned and stretched, fluttering her eyelashes. “I’m exhausted. I think I might strut myself right up to my room to take a long, hot bath.”

“Okay,” I said with guarded measure, relieved that she was excusing herself to lift the fog of the awkwardness between us.

She spun around as if a revelation hit her like a light bulb flashing on through the darkness. “Do you want to join me?” Her voice was high and shrill, squeaky like a duck.

“I can’t,” I blurted out, faltering for an excuse, a reason to deny her.

Her cheeks flushed with disappointment and she poked out her bottom lip. “Why not, baby?”

“Because I’m busy too,” I divulged, quick on the spot.

Her eyebrows frowned with suspicion. “What do you have to do?”

I chuckled, rolling my wrist as I swirled my hand through the air. “Just business, politics. The usual prince duties. Affairs that would completely bore you.” I gave her an enchanted smile.

My convincing worked. She smiled as she swayed her hips over to the door. It disappeared as she floated through it.

“I’ll be naked and sudsy upstairs if you change your mind.”

Her seductive voice chimed through the hallways, but I only had one purpose and duty on my agenda tonight, and that was to figure out what she had been talking about on the phone, and more importantly, *who* she was discussing things with.

As soon as I was certain she was gone, I used the opportunity to sneak off in the other direction in an attempt to call Rose and check in to see how things were going with her and how she might be faring during this marathon of stress we were enduring.

I wiped the beads of sweat that had formed on my temples from the anxiety of the encounter I’d just faced with Tia. I had almost blown my cover. I needed to relax and take a deep breath. She was going to be on guard now, and it was all my fault. I needed to check in with my sources.

Making sure to lock my office door behind me, sealing the room so that she wouldn’t be able to enter, I finally sagged into the chair behind my desk. I allowed my shoulders and my muscles to relax. My body was sore, a direct protest to how tense I had been back there with Tia.

I knew Tia was up to something, but I didn’t have all the facts yet. It was in my best interest to take a breather, step back, and initiate a goal for searching deeper into the big picture. For now, Tia probably just suspected something. She was already aware that I was having trouble adjusting to an illusion of life with her, so I knew I had a little wiggle room, but I was skating on thin ice. I couldn’t afford to make another mistake again or wear my emotions on my sleeve, out in plain sight for her to stomp, smash, and annihilate.

I pulled my cellphone from my back pocket with a pounding heart. I didn’t know what to expect or whether Rose would even want to talk to me. I hadn’t received the luxury of getting a chance to step away from the chaos with Tia in order to call Rose. I yearned to console her. I was burning with desire for her and wanted to make that at least verbally clear for now. The faster she was back in my arms, the faster my mind could stop swirling at a million miles an hour.

The phone rang, jolting me into a sense of reality. It rang several more times, giving me the mental sensation that I was tumbling down a black tunnel as I waited expectantly for her to pick up.

Why wasn’t she answering? Something was terribly wrong. My worst fears were becoming realized.

Perhaps my mind was trying to convince me that whatever Tia had been talking about had just been a

ploy to throw me off track. I needed to hear Rose's voice. I needed the reassurance that she was safe and secure, either tucked away at home or working happily in her veterinary clinic.

"Pick up the phone," I breathed into the receiver, becoming more desperate as the seconds ticked by.

Finally, I heard the sound of someone on the other end. It was muffled, as if whoever was there was attempting to move the phone to their ear.

"Hello?" A male voice snapped my senses in half.

I paused. "Davon?"

"Darbnix!" His voice sounded high and shattered.

"What are you doing answering Rose's phone?" I pressed as fear trickled down my spine.

"Oh, it's horrible." Davon choked, coughed, and then made a sobbing hiccup type of sound.

I stood up, paranoia seething through my veins. "What is horrible. Davon? Tell me. What happened? Where is Rose?" I was tossing out questions at an overwhelming speed that my computer crimes agent was not able to keep up with.

"They took her." He sniffed apologetically. "I was here when it happened. They were aggressive, brutal. I couldn't stop them . . ." He trailed off meekly.

"Who took her?" I already knew the answer, but I needed to hear it as confirmation from his lips.

"Your guards. There were four of them. Henders was the ringleader," Davon explained.

"Took her where?" I pressed.

"They refused to say where they were bringing her," Davon recounted in a shaky voice as if he was still recovering from the ordeal. "They barged into Rose's house and said they were there to arrest her on your orders. They handcuffed her and sped her away."

"What?" I roared, then remembered the intensity of my voice. I couldn't call alarm to Tia. She had to remain in the dark until I figured out what was happening with Rose in the extreme likelihood that she was involved.

"Rose thinks that it's because of you," Davon voiced my true fears. "They convinced her that you were behind the arrest. Not me. I didn't believe it for a single second."

Hate blanched my tongue. My ears pulsed with anger. My fingertips buzzed with a numbness derived from fury. "Tia did this," I hissed into the phone.

"You need to contact your brothers and get them involved," Davon stated in a slightly calmer tone than before. "You need to get the media on your side too. You are the whistleblower, Darbnix."

His words sank into my soul, saturating my mind. I knew he was right. "I have a feeling they must have taken her into custody and locked her in the prison cells behind the palace walls," I declared. I will go searching for her as soon as I call my brothers and the press."

“Good idea,” Davon said, then added, “In the meantime, what will you have me do?” His voice had a zing to it as if he were eager to help me put out fires and enforce damage control.

“Get on your computer systems,” I instructed. “Find out whatever damning evidence you can on Tia Teller, and then relay it back to me.”

“Will do, Boss,” he said in a professional tone.

We hung up and I punched the side of my desk. I needed an outlet for blowing off steam. My desk received the blunt force, but I reeled back in pain. The desk was hard, and I was no match for it.

How could my own guards do this to me? They had kidnapped her without even advising me on the subject. I would see to it that they received a proper punishment. It just went to show that the manipulations that Tia Teller was capable of were mind-boggling.

I clicked on my instant communicator device that was attached to my wrist and looked like a watch. As soon as Herders’s face snapped into the screen, I started firing rounds of questions to him.

“Where is she?” I demanded. “Why would you take direct orders from a woman I’m not even married to yet?”

Herders’s face displayed conflict. “She is in custody . . .” he trailed off. The screen kept cutting out as if there was not enough juice in his receiver to properly provide service. He must be in the cells where prisoners were harbored. Right now, there were none, aside from my beautiful and innocent Rose. I was frantic to free her, to put the devious Tia Teller under the microscope and reveal her true agenda under the spotlight.

With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I called each of my brothers to get them up to speed on the turmoil. They agreed to meet me at the palace where we would contact the press together and try to enlist them in a failproof plan to take Tia down, once and for all.

I was still awaiting word from Davon, determining whether he would be able to track down Tia’s whereabouts with a device that could ping to her cellphone. From there, we would be able to gauge her exact location. If she ventured into the palace prison cells or outside the palace walls, we would be able to hunt down her every move.

Tia didn’t know it yet, but she was inadvertently in the crosshairs, leading us straight to Rose without even knowing it. I was ready for an ambush. I would do everything in my power to clear mine and Rose’s names, all while revealing the devious behavior of Tia Teller in the process.

CHAPTER 18

ROSE

The handcuffs were digging into the sensitive skin across my wrists, causing the flesh there to become irritated, red, and swollen.

"Please," I begged as I shook my arms behind my back. "These handcuffs are hurting me. Can't you loosen them?"

The guard strutting along beside me with a military stride pursed his lips into a thin line, ignoring my plea as he stared straight ahead, stone-faced and cold.

I moaned with discomfort, trying to wiggle myself free, but my efforts were in vain. I was flanked by two guards, one on my left and one on my right. Each of them had machine guns strapped across their chests that hung loosely from their jackets by straps around their shoulders.

The both clutched their weapons with black leather gloves, looking like they couldn't resist an opportunity to put the guns to good use. I swallowed hard and pressed forward as we trekked across dry grass that tickled and itched at my exposed ankles.

Up until that point, the guards had blindfolded me along the way. As we stepped out of the car into what appeared to be a secluded field, the guards nudged me along with the barrels of their guns temporarily poking threateningly into my back.

"Walk," they had hissed, jolting me as if I was a horse that had just been whipped into fright and took off galloping in a haphazard direction.

Only I didn't leap away. They held their grips tightly around my elbows and I stumbled across the high grass that looked like it hadn't been mowed in a number of months.

A pair of yellow butterflies fluttered past my face, making my heart pound with a resolution of hope that reflected in the majestic way they'd appeared out of nowhere. As I watched them drift away, skirting along the wind, I said a silent prayer to my guardian angel. I hoped that the butterflies were a symbol. That wherever these men were taking me, I'd somehow either have the strength, resources, or opportunity to either escape or survive against all odds.

I didn't dare ask them where we were going. I had a calm and rational mindset. I gathered the endurance to press forward. I had a subtle intuition tickling at my soul that if I just followed instructions and did as I was told, I might get out of this dreadful situation somehow and in one piece.

The further we wandered across the abandoned pastures, the more my heart began to pound with anxiety for the gravity of the danger I might be in.

I dared a glance at the guard on my right. He looked young, not more than twenty years old. The other guard looked much older, as if he could be the young soldier's father. Both of them had stoic, aggressive looks on their faces that refused to yield any type of emotion whatsoever.

I stared straight ahead. I narrowed my eyes as it looked like we were closing in on some type of shed or tiny barn. The walls were weathered and rotting, made of wood that looked damp and had green moldy spots in the crevices and cracks.

I began nervously panting like a parched animal. My tongue suddenly felt swollen. My eyes went fuzzy and the world blurred to an intensely heated haze that closed in on me. If they were leading me into that shed, I had no idea how I would ever defend myself or cry out for help.

To my horror, the older guard nudged me with his knee. "Go inside."

The younger guard pushed the door open. It creaked and whined in protest.

"Go in there?" I searched both guards' faces with wild and frantic panic that threatened to devour me.

"Go." The older guard nudged in the direction of the open door as if there was no room for debate or protest on the subject.

I held my breath and walked inside. It was dark. My eyes burned as they tried to adjust to the lack of light. It smelled musty and damp.

"Where are we?" I finally choked out.

"Sit there." The younger guard looked reluctant to coax me into doing something against my will, but he gave me a subtle nudge toward a wicker chair.

I sat as directed but continued to demand answers. "Did Prince Darbnix arrange this? Where is he? I deserve to know. I have Earth citizen rights . . ." I trailed off, knowing my threats were not enough to persuade these men into letting me go. They had already made it this far with me. It was too late for them to turn back.

"She'll be here in a minute," the older guard stated abstractly yet formally as he tied me to a chair with my arms still behind my back.

He kept the dingy rope slack, but not wobbly enough for me to get free. He unlatched the handcuffs and shoved them into a utility belt on his waist. He stood off to the side as if he, too, were awaiting specific instructions before proceeding any further.

The air was still and silent. My breath hung suspended in my lungs. My eyes darted left and right, adjusting to the darkness. There was no sound until the ominous creaking of wooden floorboards pelted my eardrums and shattered my heart. Who was approaching me?

Then out of nowhere, a flash of light burst through the room like a cosmic solar flare. Tia Teller stood a few inches in front of me. A devilish sneer stretched across her perfect cherry lips.

She was dressed in a magnificent, gorgeous blue dress that was skintight and revealed all her voluptuous curves. Her blonde hair fell down her back in a cascade of freshly spun silk.

"Tia . . .?" I squeaked, coughing as I glanced at the guards in confusion. "What are you doing here?" I choked.

Tia began to laugh with a sinister edge to her tone. Her eyes were blue, piercing through me. I tensed every muscle in my body as she approached me with stiletto pumps adorning her feet.

"Well, well, well," she began, waving her hand dramatically through the air, the one holding the cellphone with the flashlight that shone brightly in my eyes. "How the mighty have fallen."

"Let me go," I hissed, fully prepared to confront my rival-turned-enemy.

Tia let out a condescending laugh. "I don't think that's going to happen. You see, I have Prince Darbnix wrapped so tightly around my finger that he might snap like a rubber band."

"He doesn't love you," I snarled.

It was my only defense.

I wiggled and squirmed in an effort to free myself from the knots tied around my wrists with a rope, but it was no use, and it only made Tia roar with shriller laughter than before.

"Let's face it, carrot head," Tia drawled as she wandered over to me, swaying her hips and making a point to stare daggers in my eyes. "I won. You lost." She shrugged, glancing at the guards, who shuffled their feet nervously and kept their poised stance.

An idea popped into my brain, a magnificent one that might be her undoing if I had witnesses to vouch for me.

"Tell me, Tia," I coaxed, willing to play her little game if it meant her downfall would be that much quicker. "How did you manage to win Prince Darbnix's heart?" If my hands hadn't been tied, I would have used sardonic air quotes regarding winning Darbnix's heart.

Tia scoffed as if that subject were obvious. She twirled around in a dramatic princess-farm-bred-beauty-queen manner.

"Have you *seen* me?" Her mouth was agape with bafflement.

I smirked, knowing that I had the intelligent upper hand. "I'm just surprised, that's all." I shrugged in a blasé way that I knew was gnawing under her skin.

She edged closer to me until she was so close that her perfume flooded my nostrils and made me recoil.

"What are you implying, carrot head?" she hissed.

I glanced over at the guards, who were looking dubious for being gullible enough to fall for Tia's trap and provide her any assistance whatsoever.

I knew that Darbnix wasn't behind this. He wouldn't have his guards tie me to a chair. It just wasn't

part of his hardwiring. He was nothing short of a gentleman.

“How did you tamper with the device?” I asked as if we were having a leisurely conversation that held no merit.

“The scanner?” Tia’s cheeks blushed rosy and she smiled coyly. “It was easy really. Darbnix is such a big dumb brute that he didn’t even see it coming. I infiltrated his computer system until I was able to alter the feedback from the receivers. I wore a necklace that the genetic scanner would recognize, thus tricking the device to ultimately light up after being pointed in my general direction.”

Tia strutted about the room as if she were proud of her fail-safe concoction of a plan, wickedly sneering as she gave me side-eye glares.

“It sounds like you have everything all figured out then,” I mocked.

I knew that I needed to do my best to keep myself together. Showing any sign of weakness to Tia Teller would be my downfall. She was the type to manipulate anyone and brainwash them into going along with her evil plots. The guards standing on either side of me were proof of that and probably regretted ever saying more than a simple hello in passing to her.

“You’re damn right, I do.” Tia flipped her perfect blonde hair behind her shoulder, cackling maliciously.

Then, she approached me with devious specks flickering in her gaze. “I relish every single second of taking Darbnix and his idiotic brothers on a ride.” Then she was right next to my face. I could see the caked-on layers of makeup. It must have been several inches thick.

She narrowed her eyes as a shadow cast across her features. She held the light from the phone right up next to me. “I will make you disappear forever for trying to steal what was promised to me.”

My skin crawled. A chill ran up my spine, but I kept it together. I held myself in one piece, resisting the urge to crack. I didn’t know why this vicious stranger hated me so much just because I was ordinary in her eyes and had a chemistry and connection with Darbnix. She wanted to take me down for following my heart and my natural instincts, and that made her my enemy.

Then, a stunning revelation flashed in my mind as if a lightbulb had suddenly been flicked on in order to light up the room. My thoughts were swirling with brainstorming ambition.

“Tia, you are forgetting something,” I dripped in a haughty tone.

“What?” She whipped around, staring at me as if she wanted to slap me across the cheek.

I nudged my chin in the direction of the guards. “You have a little audience who has been listening to every word you said.”

I gave her a sinister smirk as if I had her right where I wanted her. Now, it was her turn to fall into a trap. Karma always came back around like a pendulum swinging from a string.

Tia’s mouth hung open. Her jaw went slack, and a wild craze entered her already wide-rimmed blue eyes. She stammered, unable to verbalize an entire sentence.

There was an intensity that hung in the air. The guards shifted their weight uncomfortably and stared at the dusty wood floor as if they wished there were some way to use a mind trick to melt right into it and disappear altogether.

I held my breath, waiting to see what Tia would do next, what kind of act of defiance or excuse she would hash out in order to weasel her way out of the corner she was backed into.

I heard a thunderous crash and jumped, screaming in fright. At first, my mind was under the impression that a bomb had exploded outside the shed. I squeezed my eyes shut, but as I heard crashing footsteps entering the room, I knew I had to open them again to survive.

Then, my heart stopped. Darbnix was looming over us. His fists were balled and his eyes were glowing with hatred and fury. He looked like he could spit lava. Davon was by his side, looking diplomatic and smug. A roar of guards bellowed into the room and stood by Darbnix's side. A few media cameras clicked and flashed as Tia shrieked and tried to conceal herself, but it was no use. She was trapped with nowhere to go but into the abyss of her own lies.

CHAPTER 19

DARBNIX

"Darbnix, my love!" Tia cooed, waltzing in my direction with a tone that dripped with breezy delight. She was as fake as her tan. "What are you doing here?"

She gave me a feigned lecturing glance as if I were her child who had appeared from behind a door and been caught looking at something they weren't supposed to see.

"I could ask you the same thing," I said. "Why is Dr. Rose Rand tied to a chair?" I pointed in Rose's direction. She was as white as a sheet. Her eyes darted left and right, between me and Tia and our vicious exchange.

"I found her this way!" Tia placed her palm to her chest and gave me a look of bewilderment as if she were baffled and horrified to find Rose in such a compromising position.

"Really?" I gave her a sardonic smirk, not believing a single word that came out of her slimy mouth.

"Yes!" It was almost comical, bordering entertaining, the way Tia was trying to cover her tracks. She might have found herself to be sly, but I saw underneath her wild schemes. I was on to her, and she wasn't going to get away with it this time.

"Thank goodness you brought the press here to cover this horrible event," Tia drawled dramatically. Her cheeks flushed, and she pretended to wipe sweat from her brow. "I don't know what would have become of Dr. Rand if we hadn't found her out here, all tied up."

"Exactly *who* do you suppose tied her up?" I snarled. I was losing patience in playing Tia's little game.

"I have no idea, but when we do . . . we need to make sure they are properly punished!" Tia shook her head with perplexity as if it was a crying shame.

"Stop lying."

Out of the darkness of the shed, Rose's smooth voice chimed like a songbird in the night.

"You know what you did."

Rose's voice was taut, malicious, and vindicating. My heart pounded, and a smile crested the edges of my lips. Even through all the torment she had endured, she was still a fighter. She was a strong and

resilient woman who was determined to never give up, and I admired her. I was bursting at the seams with love for her.

Tia began laughing with hysteria ringing in her voice. “What on earth are you talking about, dear friend?”

“She’s not your friend.” Tobbin, my youngest guard, dared to speak out. He stepped out of the shadows and into the light from cellphones lit up by my guards. He was glaring maliciously at Tia. A deep scowl etched across the lines of his forehead. “You did this to her. You forced us to bring her here and tie her up.”

Tia gasped as if lies were physically sprouting from Tobbin’s tongue. “How dare you,” she snapped with fury. “It’s not true.” She spun around to look at me, a plea for mercy twinkling in her wide blue eyes.

I walked over to Rose and kneeled down beside her. “Are you hurt?” I gently stroked the side of her cheek, which was stained and damp from tears.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head as she nervously kept her eyes locked on Tia as if she didn’t trust her for a second to be out of her sight.

“Let’s get you out of this rope,” I told her as I moved behind her back to cut through the dingy white rope holding her hands behind her back.

She winched in pain and instinctively drew her hands up to her chest. I noticed with horror that her wrists were swollen and red, raw from where the coarse fibers of the rope had been rubbing with friction against her sensitive skin.

“I will make sure we get our medical teams to look at your wrists and bandage them up,” I reassured her.

“It’s okay.” Rose gave me a brave and stoic glance. “I’ll be fine.”

I kissed her softly on the lips. Her scent and her taste were so wonderfully familiar. She was a breath of fresh air to my senses.

“I love you,” I whispered gently into her ears. “We will make it through this.”

Rose nodded as if she wanted to believe me but was still having difficulty in the dreadful situation we were in. “I love you, too,” she stated as her voice cracked.

Tia cleared her throat behind us.

“Excuse me?” she shrieked in a shrill tone. “What are you doing, Darbnix? Get off that woman. She is trying to tear our relationship apart.”

I whipped around to glare at her. “We have *no* relationship, Tia.”

Tia pouted, but she didn’t skip a beat. “I’m your genetic match, remember, sweetheart?” Her voice was laced with malicious warning, as if I shouldn’t dare protest her or cross her again.

“Why did you lie?” I pressed her, unafraid of what she was capable of. I was ready to tear her down.

Tia cackled. “Darling, I didn’t lie about anything.” She shook her head in denial.

I pointed to Rose, who was standing beside me. I protectively took a step in her direction.

“Then please enlighten me, Tia. Why did you lie to my guards and have them believe you when you ordered them to kidnap an innocent woman on your behalf?”

I raised an expectant eyebrow and waited patiently, humored to see what kind of excuse Tia would pull out of that empty brain of hers.

Tia scoffed, looking both appalled and insulted. “I did nothing of the sort.” Her eyes were a steel color, refusing to crack.

“It’s true.” Herders’s voice bellowed through the room, confirming what I already knew, the horror that Rose had endured.

“I will have you arrested for talking to me that way!” Tia yelled in Herders’s direction. “I am soon to be the princess of Noor. I will not be defied.”

She stood her ground, pursing her lips together. Her hands locked on her hips and she looked like a pouty, sullen child who was not getting her way.

“You will be the princess of nothing,” I hissed, glaring daggers through Tia.

The cameras were rolling. The hungry press held their shots, kept their microphones turned all the way up. Those lucky enough to attend and witness this ousting in person knew how important it was to capture the essence of the moment and bring Tia Teller to justice.

“Tell everyone the truth, Tia,” I snarled with a coy smile. “Tell everyone on live television how you hacked the genetic scanners in order for them to register you as the match.”

“I . . . no, it’s not what you think.” Tia was stammering, grasping at straws. She knew she was backed into a corner. Her eyes were wide and stunned, like a deer caught in headlights.

“Unfortunately for you, Ms. Teller,” Davon declared as he stepped in front of the lights attached to the cameras, “we have been outside, shooting footage this entire time. We captured all your filthy, devious lies on camera and on our microphones.”

A vile scream erupted from Tia’s throat. It was primal, and her lips curled into a devious, maniacal twist.

“It wasn’t me,” she proclaimed as she desperately tried to fight off the interplanetary police force I had brought with me for this sole purpose. They were in charge of distributing punishment and crimes across the planets to protect the rights of any and all races.

She flailed her arms and legs, kicking and biting at the captain and his men as they struggled to keep a tight grip on her. Tia’s hair was askew, and her face was contorted with fresh batches of fury that made her exceptionally disgusting.

“I will tell you everything you want to know,” she panted. “I will give up my accomplice who hacked the genetic scanners. I can tell you who was behind this plan the whole time. I swear it wasn’t my

trap."

Tia continued to ramble. Her hands were now tied behind her back with handcuffs as the guards attempted to drag her across the shed's floor and to the door.

There wasn't time to react to Tia's outburst. There wasn't time to ask her what she was referring to. We were robbed of that moment in an instant. Everything changed.

Tia's body suddenly went slack. Her once-protesting arms went as limp as noodles by her sides. Her jaw opened, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

I glanced at Rose, who appeared to be just as baffled at Tia's changed demeanor as I was.

"What the hell is going on?" I shouted to the intergalactic police, thinking they might have slipped her something in order to pacify her, like a tranquilizer shot in her arm, or worse. As much as I despised Tia, her cooperation was vital. It was essential that we receive whatever information from her we could on who might be the puppet master behind Tia's strings.

It appeared that the mastermind in charge of Tia and her fate was not going to allow that to happen. Whoever was behind the curtain, and Davon and I strongly suspected Julia Morse to be the culprit, they were going to cover their tracks no matter the cost.

Tia fell to the floor in a crumpled heap. Her body began shaking. The guards hovering above her had looks of horror splashed across their faces. She began to convulse. Her legs and arms jerked at her sides, but this time, it was part of a seizure episode, not trying to get away.

White foam began oozing out of her mouth. Her eyes rolled back in her head. She started making a moaning sound that was like a frog croaking.

"What's happening to her?" My gaze flicked to the medic on scene who shrugged, then rushed to Tia's side, crouching on the ground as he began placing monitors on her chest and a breathing apparatus, some type of oxygen mask, over her mouth.

I stretched my arm around Rose, squeezing her tightly. "Come on," I said protectively. "Let's get out of here."

I don't know why, but I had a terrible feeling about the situation. We needed to flee the area as quickly as possible.

I looked behind me, curious to see what was happening to Tia. Her arms and legs were beginning to swell. Her torso began to rise like a blimp. Her dress popped off her body and all her veins became thick highways of purple under outstretched, translucent skin.

Rose screamed as I watched the medic jogging in the direction of the door. "Go, go!" he cried. "She's going to blow!"

Before I knew what was happening, a flash of light blinded me. It was violent, radiating, and nearly burned my eyes right out of my eye sockets. Then, a loud, thundering crash nearly burst my eardrums.

Tia exploded like a bomb.

There was smoke and a sizzling fire that was crackling in the corner where the remains of Tia sat in a singed heap. Tia was dead, completely destroyed along with all the evidence that could have come along with a confession of sorts. Whoever was behind this plot was devious and murderous. I would have to go to the ends of the Earth to protect Rose now.

EPILOGUE

ROSE

"Do it. What the hell are you waiting for?"

Prince Rawklix, Darbnix's younger, trendier, and much less patient youngest brother, coaxed him on. He flicked his wrist insolently in the direction of the scanner.

Darbnix took it all in stride. He was grinning at me with all the excited energy contained in the entire universe.

"Are you ready?" Darbnix ignored his brother as he stared into my eyes with compassion and longing.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I was afraid to open them until the results came back favorable . . . well, *if* they came back with delightful news.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be," I insisted, inhaling sharply. I stood as stiff as a board and waited expectantly.

Darbnix stood in front of me. His genetic scanner had been cleared of all the hacking systems contained inside. The programming had been reconfigured and rewired by his engineering team. They had continuously apologized to Prince Darbnix. In his rational and down-to-earth state of mind, he was quick to accept their groveling. All was water under the bridge as far as he was concerned.

"Turn the damn thing on already," his brother Manzar droned. "You already know she'll be a match."

"He knows nothing of the sort," his brother Akrawn argued. "But he sure is hoping for those results," he snickered.

"Quiet, all of you." I gave them playful yet stern glances and then closed my eyes again while I grinned. My heart raced in my chest. I was sizzling with anticipation.

"Okay . . ." Darbnix said in a hesitant, yet enthusiastic tone. "Here I go . . ." He trailed off and I heard silence for a few moments.

My heart plummeted through my chest. Was the device not reading me as a match? I hadn't taken the time to prepare myself for the chance that we might not be biologically linked.

Then, I saw flashes of light that seeped under my sealed eyelids. Then jubilant and gleeful shrieks began to fill my ears. It was enough for me to pop open one eye and then the next.

In front of me stood Darbnix. Tears of joy pooled in his eyes and glistened as they dripped down his cheeks. The genetic scanner in his hand was vibrantly flashing with the most electrifying, vivid colors ever imaginable. Hues of white, pink, red, and green flashed in front of us, peppering our bodies with the flickers from the device. It was making such a scene that it looked like fireworks might erupt from the computer mechanics inside.

"I'm a match!" My voice was raspy with shock at first, but then I said it again, this time as more of a question. "I'm a match?"

Darbnix jogged the few steps over to me and draped his hands around my neck, splattering me with adoring, loving kisses.

"You are my match. I knew it all along. I felt it in my bones. The chemistry between us couldn't deny us or tear us apart, no matter what kind of roadblocks we faced along the way."

We were both sobbing with joy, running our hands all over each other's body. It wasn't until Darbnix's oldest brother, Gardax, cleared his throat that we were suddenly jolted with the remembrance that we hadn't been alone.

We blinked, staring with bashful awkwardness at our audience. I couldn't contain my elation. I didn't care if they saw me passionately immersed in a loving and affectionate kiss with my one true soulmate. Having it confirmed via the scanner's mesmerizing brightness was just the icing on the cake.

"I'm a match!" I threw my hands up in the air, suddenly hit with the jolting and exhilarating thrill of becoming Darbnix's princess.

I had been through hell and back, but all the pain and suffering were worth it to come full-circle in this moment of serene bliss.

"I can't wait for you to be my wife." Darbnix glanced at me, lovestruck. His eyes glazed over with sheer infatuation. The man of my dreams was swooning, and it was over *me*.

I never wanted to pinch myself and wake up from this surreal dream. We were not only genetically compatible, but we shared the same hopes and dreams. We both loved animals and a simple life on a farm. I couldn't have asked for a better outcome, and judging by Darbnix's cloudy gaze of bliss, I knew he was rocking in the same boat with me.

Prince Akrawn approached Darbnix, nuzzling his dark hair with his knuckles before giving him a fond, brotherly slap on the back.

"I know we just like to tease you, but congratulations are definitely in order. We are happy that you have found your match." Akrawn gave me a hug. "Congratulations, dear," he whispered.

"Thank you so much." I couldn't help myself. I was beaming, like a blossoming flower that stretches toward the sunlight.

"I love the fact that I have witness accounts to attest to the scanner's results!" Darbnix declared. It wasn't lost on me that he flicked his gaze subtly to his older brother, Prince Gardax, who had originally given him a hard time on the subject.

“Yes, indeed.” Gardax rolled his eyes and chuckled politely. “We will have much to celebrate in the coming months.”

“I can’t wait to marry you,” I whispered to Darbnix, snaking my arms around his waist as I gave him a seductive stare.

“My darling, I will give you the biggest, most lavish wedding in all the world,” Darbnix proclaimed with pride.

I wasn’t a flashy person. I wrinkled my nose. “As long as I get to stand in front of my friends and family and vow my undying love for you, that’s what will make me happy.”

“Maybe Slith can be the ring bearer?” Darbnix pondered.

“What a fantastic idea!” I chimed. After all, the beloved watch-lizard pet was the true matchmaker in this love tale. If it wasn’t for his eating the entire pantry, I never would have met Darbnix in the first place.

A knock at the door made us all turn. “Come in,” Darbnix stated cautiously. Since the fateful day of Tia Teller’s explosion, we had all been a little on guard lately.

Davon walked through the door, looking lanky and awkward, as usual. “Hello,” he stated as he nodded with polite acknowledgement around the room. “I hear that congratulations are in order?”

I grinned. Davon didn’t skip a beat, nor did he ever miss anything.

“That’s right.” Darbnix wrapped his arms around my waist and squeezed. “We are a proven match by the genetic scanner.”

“It’s official,” I added with a squeak of delight.

“That’s wonderful,” Davon declared, but his expression was all business. “Might I have a word with Prince Darbnix and his soon-to-be princess?” He somberly requested.

“Of course.” Gardax glanced around the room. “Shall we?”

Darbnix’s brothers all filed out of the room, leaving us alone with Davon.

“Have you found anything else out about the Tia Teller situation?” I asked breezily, on pins and needles.

“I have, indeed.” Davon gave me a respectful bow that made me blush. Having power and authority was something I was going to have to adapt to.

“I’m following up on her case,” Davon explained. “From what I have already gathered in her background, I have learned that Julia Morse implanted a bio-bomb into Tia’s arm as a way to both keep tabs on her and keep her quiet about their little scheme.”

“Wow,” I stated. My jaw dropped in shock. “Is that what killed her?”

“It is,” Davon confirmed with a nod. “After some hefty research, it’s been determined that Julia used a bio-bomb of the same type to kill another of her underlings a couple of years ago.”

“That’s horrible,” Darbnix tsked. “Is Julia in custody yet?”

Davon shook his head gravely. “We are still trying to build the evidence against her before any arrests are made.”

“Let us know if you need any help along the way,” I offered. This Julia woman sounded hostile and dangerous.

“So as soon as Julia’s plans or name became compromised or under any sort of threat, the bio-bomb would erupt?” Darbnix asked for verification.

“That’s right.” Davon nodded.

I couldn’t believe it. “Tia was a phony, a fake person, but she probably didn’t deserve to die in that horrible way,” I said.

Darbnix gave me a glance as if he viewed me as a saint, then looked back to Davon. “Let us know if we can offer any aid in the investigation,” he said.

“I will.” Davon smiled, then shook Darbnix’s hand. “Thank you for all the help you have already given us.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse us,” Darbnix said as he delicately placed his hand on the small of my back, “we have some wedding planning to do.”

I blushed with excitement and a leaping heart. “See you later, Davon.” I nodded over my shoulder.

Prince Darbnix had not only swept me off my feet but had saved my life as well. I owed him everything. I couldn’t wait to close this chapter and start a new, brighter future together. Hand in hand, we would change the world into a better place, one day at a time.

ABOUT ZARA ZENIA

Zara Zenia writes steamy, sexy, and suspenseful sci-fi romances! You will find her writing alien romances from intergalactic planets, bionic romances, superheroes and time travel romances too.

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zarazenia.com
zara@zarazenia.com

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ZARUV PREVIEW

Preview:

Book 1 of the Aliens of Dragselis Series: Zaruv: A Sci-Fi Alien Dragon Romance

CHAPTER 1-ZARUV

Pavar glared at Karun while nodding in respect toward his elder brother. “We are heading to Artax, where we are sentenced to live out our lives away from our home and our people but you still support the rule?”

“I do,” replied Karun confidently. “The system, though flawed, has worked well long before we were here. It will continue to work long after we are gone.”

“You make Artax sound like a prison,” I interjected. “Artax is a resort planet, dear brother. We are going to live out our lives with more Dragselian woman and servants than we can handle. Yet you seem to find a way to make it sound terrible.”

“That’s because it is! I want to be back home on Dragselia, not billions of light years away from it.”

“You are so ready to start a fight when our father has not even been dead a week. You mourn the loss of your comfort, but not the man who provided it. You should be ashamed, Pavar,” Ragal said.

My two brothers sat down at the table with myself and Pavar. Looking around at them I saw the stark differences between them. Each one of them had a different personality that had its flaws, but also its winning qualities. I could think of no better warrior than Karun. His strength, speed, and agility were almost matched with my own. An anger boiled below the surface though. He hated the exile even more than Pavar, though his loyalty to the Dragselian way ran deeper than his disdain.

“We are not far from Artax now, I think you will sing a new song once you see what waits for us there, Pavar,” Karun said

“Karun, you won’t win. I would encourage you to let it go now before a war of our own starts,” interjected Ragal.

“I agree,” I said while nodding to Ragal. “There is nothing that we can do about it now. Pavar, you may voice your concerns among us brothers, but once we reach Artax, there will be no room for that hostility.”

“Why not?” Pavar fumed.

I started to speak, but it was again Ragal who answered. “Because Artax is a haven of Dragselian. To speak against your king would be unforgivable.”

“Maybe that’s what I need to do then, at least I wouldn’t be living a lie.”

Karun sighed and shook his head, “Then we will be forced to live with your death. You will be painted the selfish, spoiled brat that you are.”

Pavar leaped up, but I raised my hand in a command for him to sit. He begrudgingly listened. This wasn’t the first time that he’d tried to start a fight in the close quarters and I knew it wouldn’t be the last. I didn’t worry about Ragal. His level head and passive nature wouldn’t allow him to partake in such a pointless fight. It was the others that I was worried about. Karun was a fighter and Pavar was an instigator but Ragal only wanted peace to reign out over all others. I smiled at him as he sat silently, looking out at the stars as they flew past us.

“We are close,” Ragal whispered beneath Pavar and Karun’s argument.

I looked out the front window and took in the beauty of the planet. It had been many years since I’d ventured to the area. Everything seemed the same. A small flicker of light caught my eye. At first, I thought that it was a star, but it seemed to be moving. Another ship in this area was common. Artax was a popular resort planet. No chime of the security console came but that did little to comfort me. It was programmed to send a message to all ships in our area, keep track of their level of danger.

Our vessel did not bear the royal insignia of our home planet. It was too dangerous to openly declare that there were royals on board. Throughout the area, there were Infernians lurking and waiting for our capture and eventual death. If no heirs to the throne were alive, they could easily overthrow our rule. I kept a watchful eye on the ship. It wouldn’t take much to fool our system. A false sense of security might blanket those who didn’t know the price on our heads, but it did little to put my mind at ease.

“What troubles you, brother?” Ragal asked, watching the changes of my face.

I shook my head, not wanting to alert the others of potential danger until I was sure. “It’s nothing, just my paranoid mind playing tricks on me. I think that I, too, am getting a little stir crazy.”

Ragal smiled and leaned back, “I believe it's infected me as well. I will be glad when I can again rest my feet on solid ground.”

I snickered, Ragal hated to be on ships. The uncertainty of the unknown did little to comfort him. He was not one for adventure. Left alone with his charts and the stars, he was a very happy nomad. I glanced back at the window, searching for the small blinking light. At first, I thought it had gone, moved onto whatever planet it was destined for, but then I caught it again, this time it was closer and worse, it wasn’t alone.

My heart started to race, wondering if it was enough danger to alert the others. In my hesitation to speak though, a heavy silence fell over the cabin. Karun and Pavar were no longer arguing with each other. The silence had transformed into a heavy fog, waiting for me to speak and lift it. I glanced back at the approaching ships, four in total and knew that I needed to make a decision. They would be on us

in a matter of minutes.

“Zaruv?” Karun asked, “What troubles you?”

I looked him in the eyes, dark and brooding as always. We were an incredibly attractive lot by human standards. Our bodies had little to no hair, save for our heads which flowed freely down our backs, mine in waves of deep auburn. My heart was racing; we were not prepared for a fight as we flew in a passenger vessel with no security. Instantly, I regretted my decision to not push for some sort of escort. These were troubling times for our kind, as evident by the unmarked ships now closing in.

Karun saw them before I responded to him, “Are they Infernian ships?”

I shook my head, “There is no way to know. They do not have any markers or colors. I don’t think they are coming to be friends though. Jartex?”

A computer voice rang out over our heads. Jartex was our security system. “Yes, my prince?”

“Can you send them a message please and ask that they identify themselves?”

“Shall I share make your royal presences known?” Jartex asked.

“No,” I whispered. “Do not share who we are with them.”

The four of us stood watching through the window as the ships grew closer. They couldn’t see us through the thick glass, but we could see enough that my heart sank to the pit of my stomach. No passenger vehicle carried the two heavy missile portals on either side, as were the ships that were now hovering a few hundred feet from us. There was little doubt in my mind that they knew who was on board.

“Sir?” said Jartax, “They do not respond to my signal. Should I try again?”

I shook my head and took a step backward, tugging Pavar and Ragal along with me. “No Jartax, it’s too late.”

My three brothers looked to me, then back to the ships now facing us. They saw the same thing that I did, the missiles being lowered by long, metallic, arms as they prepared to fire. I could feel my stomach flipping in anticipation for a split second before I reacted.

“Jartax, drop range now!” I screamed out.

My brothers scurried around and quickly buckled into the seats around the emerald table, but Pavar wasn’t fast enough. Our ship dropped from the dark sky and Pavar was shot up in the air, his back cracking against the ceiling. He quickly recovered, our bones and skeletal structure being stronger than that of humans. In our dragon forms, we were almost impossible to kill but shifting now would rip apart the small craft, sending us floating pointlessly into space.

“Take evasive measures!” I called out.

Karun quickly unbuckled and took the seat next to me as the autopilot engaged and started to dodge the incoming missiles.

“We need to get to the escape pods,” Karun said.

I shook my head, “This far from Artax, we would never make it.”

“What other options do we have? We cannot fight back; we are too far to call for help from home. It’s the only chance that we have for survival.”

An argument rose to my lips, but before I could share, the ship started to shake violently. One of the missiles had made contact, sending everything on the vessel flying through the air as we struggled to breathe through the debris and depleting oxygen. I nodded to Karun. He grabbed ahold of Pavar and I did the same to Ragal, shoving each one into an escape pod.

Before shutting the doors on the pods, I looked over at Karun and yelled, “Make for Vaxivia, I will find you all there.”

Karun nodded, as did Pavar and Ragal before we sealed them in. Within seconds we heard the alarm of an incoming missile and quickly we both dove into our escape pods. Looking around at my brothers, I hit the eject button and was sent soaring into space. Unequipped for long travel, the air in the pod grew thin just as we entered Vaxivia’s thin atmosphere.

The last memory I had before the darkness consumed me, was of my brothers. All I could do was hope that their fates had not yet ended. They were all the family I had left; someone had told the enemy where we were. There was a spy among our kind.

CHAPTER 2-JENNIFER

“Shh, Susan. Just one more and you will be all done,” I cooed to the small girl.

Her pin-straight hair fell in clumps on her cheeks. She was covered in mud. Dark streaks crisscrossed her face from where she had tried in vain to wipe away the tears. The cut was deep, but short, thankfully. She needed a few stitches, but nothing I couldn’t handle. It wasn’t often that I’d come across an injury that my small, but well-equipped outpost clinic couldn’t cover.

“Thank you so much, Jennifer,” whispered Carla, Susan’s mother.

I smiled up at her, covering the new sutures with a bandage. “It’s no problem, Carla. I’m just happy you caught me before I headed home for the day. Otherwise, we would have had to cut it off.”

Susan rolled her eyes at me but smiled, “You wouldn’t do that to me.”

I grinned at the little girl and reached behind me, producing a small, wrapped, red candy. “You’re right. I could never do that to my favorite patient. Promise me you will stay away from the dunes from now on though, okay?”

Susan nodded her head and jumped down, her eyes glued on the candy prize in her hand. I pulled Carla aside while Susan was distracted. The little girl wasn’t out of the woods yet. I couldn’t count the number of injuries I saw because of the dunes. Vaxivia was no place to let your child wander outside of the outpost limits. There hadn’t been a war in decades, but the very planet itself was a death trap unless you knew your way around it. No five-year-old should be wandering alone.

“You will need to watch for an infection. The dunes hold sand that can eat away at the skin.”

Carla folded her hands nervously in her lap, “Okay. I know she shouldn’t have been out there. I will be dealing with Michael when I get home.”

“He’s only eight, Carla. You know he shouldn’t be left alone with her all day. Isn’t there anyone who can help you out?”

She shook her head, “Please don’t tell the guards. I promise I won’t let it happen again.”

I took her hands into mine. Her story was all too common. Work on Vaxivia was hard to find. Often the men of the family left to find work and never came back. Some still sent money back home, but many, like Carla’s husband, were ghosts in the wind. She worked part time at the small diner to make ends meet, but childcare was just too expensive. My heart ached for her and the plight that she was in.

“Why don’t you send her here tomorrow? I have some things she can do around the clinic and I can keep an eye on her wound.”

“Really? She won’t get in the way?”

I smiled at Susan who was still looking at her foil wrapped trophy. Running a clinic wasn’t easy. The last thing I needed was a young girl running under foot. Still, I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to her.

“She will be fine, I promise.”

Carla thanked me all the way to the door. I knelt to speak to Susan, “Are you going to come help me tomorrow?”

She nodded her head and ran after her mom with more joy in her eyes than I’d ever seen. As I was standing up, I saw Mikey Jones running toward me at full speed. At once my heart jumped. He never ran that fast. Slight in build, Mikey was ten going on forty. Like all the young boys in the community, he had far too much weight on his young shoulders. I turned the clinic sign over to ‘Closed’ and grabbed my medical bag. I met him at the old hoverboard parked on the road.

“Jennifer! Jennifer!” he called to me. “There’s an alien ship crashed outside of the outpost!”

The blood drained from my face at once, as I quickly glanced around. I didn’t see Courtney’s nosey eyes peering through her curtains. The last thing I needed was her running around and telling the guards that we had an alien. Not when I couldn’t be sure that Mike was right. I jumped and covered his mouth with my hand. His eyes briefly shifted to fear before he nodded his head. I winced at his fear. I had momentarily forgotten about the abuse his bastard father had inflicted on him before he skipped town.

“Okay Mikey, we will go take a look but you’ve got to keep your voice down, okay?”

He nodded his head, “Sorry, Jennifer. I’m so stupid. I forgot.”

I winced again, “Mikey, you are far from stupid. I don’t want to hear you talk like that about yourself ever again, okay? I just don’t want everyone to know about the alien just yet.”

“Got it, I will be more careful,” he whispered.

Nodding, I pressed my thumb against the scanner and the hovercraft slowly roared to life. It needed to be replaced years ago, but the money just wasn't there anymore. It shook and rattled as it lifted off the ground. I waited there for a few more seconds, giving it a chance to warm up. Once it was about a foot from the ground I pushed the handlebar forward and we started to move briskly through the streets. Within seconds we were coming up on the outpost wall. I glanced at the two guards and sighed. This was going to be tricky.

"Mikey?" I asked my passenger. "You are going to hear me lie okay? I don't want them to know what you've found until I know it's safe."

He nodded his head and said nothing. I knew that he wouldn't say anything to the contrary to what I was going to say. He was another good kid tossed into a bad situation. His father wasn't missing though, he was buried in the small outpost cemetery, a victim of the dunes. With two younger sisters and a working mother, he would run errands for me and I would slip him any payment I could. Whether it was drupees or food, he was grateful for it all the same.

As I slowed to a stop, the younger of the two men sauntered over to me. I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Instead, I plastered a smile on my face. He was the last person I wanted to deal with knowing how the heavyset man felt about me. My numerous rejections of his advances never seemed to dull his attraction to me. No matter how one-sided it seemed to be. It was the same story with most of the other single men in the outpost. I didn't want to deal with any of them. The pool wasn't very deep on Vaxivia.

"How are you doing Zach?" I asked casually.

He winked at me, leaning against the hoverboard. "I'm doing a whole lot better now that you are visiting, Jennifer."

"Well, unfortunately, this isn't a social visit. I need to get out to the Jones' homestead. One of the girls has a bit of the flu. I just want to check on her to clear my mind."

He glanced around the hoverboard and saw Mikey for the first time. His mood changed at once. As soon as he realized he wasn't the center of my attention I knew that he was going to be a hard sell.

Zach shook his head, "No can do, Jennifer. We got word today that there might be hostiles in the area. Aren't supposed to let anyone in or out."

I gritted my teeth and batted my eyes. Letting my fingers trail off the controls and over to his. He twitched but didn't move his hand. His eyes lit up and a wide, white grin crossed his face.

"That's a shame. I was hoping to slip out there real fast, then be back at Sammy's by quitting time," I whispered.

He cleared his throat, the smile still on his face. I hated to lie but I knew if he thought I would be at the local pub later, he would let me go. He waved to the man at the gate and they slowly started to open.

"Thank you," I whispered to him.

He winked at me, "You can thank me later, honey."

My cheeks flushed red but not out of admiration. I didn't like having the attention of any man, least of all him. Blushing was my defense mechanism but he didn't need to know that. My skin felt like it was crawling from where I'd touched him. I was suddenly grateful for the sterilizing solution I had in my bag. I gave him one last smile as I slowly pulled through the gates and let them close behind me. As soon as I rounded the forest and I was out of sight, I pushed the throttle as hard as it would go.

"Where did you see it?" I asked Mikey once we were finally clear.

He pointed to a clearing in the forest, one that hadn't been there before. It didn't take me long to realize that the clearing was the aftermath of a large wreck. My stomach started to flutter. I couldn't believe that Mikey was telling the truth. He wasn't prone to lying, but your eyes could play tricks on even the most discerning child, especially one with a wild spirit like him. I swallowed hard and followed the trail. The closer we crept to the wreckage, the more I was regretting my decision to bring Mikey with me.

"Whatever you do, stay behind me. Do you understand?" I asked him as we parked.

He nodded his head, ducking between my arms and trying to see the wreckage. I'd never seen a ship like it before. It wasn't large, maybe a few dozen meters in width without its wings. I briefly glanced around but didn't see the wings anywhere.

"Why don't you go find the wings and other wreckage for me. I don't know what we are going to find when we open the hull, okay?"

Mikey nodded and disappeared off into the woods. The black craft was badly damaged, looking more like an ancient, buried torpedo than a ship. I looked for a door, following a trail of steam as it seeped from a thin seam. Still in shock that Mikey hadn't been lying, my attention turned to determining if there were any survivors. I was no stranger to aliens, but I kept my small gun close at my side just in case. The ship wasn't an Infernian vessel, that much was evident.

A low whistle escaped the pod and I stumbled backward, watching in stunned silence as the seam widened as a door opened. In a puff of smoke, the door creaked back on its dented hinges and my mouth fell open. There was someone inside of the pod, and from the small hole poking through the fumes, I could see a man's chest slowly moving up and down.

"Thank God," I whispered. He was alive.

When the last of the smoke cleared, I was once again stunned into silence. There wasn't much blood, less than I had expected. What gave me pause was the alien's stunning looks. His body was rugged and muscular, with olive-toned skin that I could see where his uniform had torn open. Swallowing back my words, I let my gaze travel up his body to his face. Though his eyes were closed, I could only imagine the beauty that they would behold, if they matched the rest of his figure.

His dark, auburn, hair fell loose down to his shoulders. A strong jaw and thickly lashed eyes rounded out one of the most attractive faces I'd ever seen. When a groan slipped past his lips, I jumped. As his head listlessly turned to the side, I saw the reason he was unconscious. A gaping wound cut through the side of his head. I quickly pushed my fear and wonder aside and reached into my medical bag. Any emotions that I had before were now gone. He was injured and nothing else mattered but keeping him alive.

“Mikey!” I called out.

The child was at my side in a flash. I looked deeply into his eyes, praying there would be enough strength to lift the alien between the two of us.

“We have to get him back to my apartment, and fast,” I whispered to him.

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